

The changing face of project leadership: a look at how senior project manager roles have evolved and what skillsets they require now

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Abstract

As the appetite for change that drives programmes and projects to transform organisations becomes ever more urgent, we are seeing the emergence of the role of a super project manager. This article outlines some strategies for organisations looking to develop their most senior project leaders.

The appetite for change that drives programmes and projects to transform organisations has become ever more urgent. After a number of years of restraint, increasingly we are finding the resources and enthusiasm to deliver more change than ever. At the same time, projects are more complex and cross-cutting and organisations are seeking to implement an agile approach to handle all of this complexity and deliver capability sooner. These factors are driving the emergence of a breed of super project manager or project leader who possesses a broader range of skills and competence than traditional project managers.

Traditionally, while projects may be complicated the structures were quite straightforward, with a controlled start, middle and end delivering a defined output through clear, robust and well-understood processes. While the expectation of innovation in projects has increased, a high percentage of projects were repetitions of previous project undertakings with just a few adaptations.

Modern project management is increasingly complex. Internally, senior project managers must have an understanding of the stability and sensitivity of the project objectives and the strategic importance of a project to the organisation – especially its financial significance. Depending on the scale of the project, the senior leader may have to take into account added hierarchies and layers of governance and reporting arrangements. They must have a clear appreciation of the needs of a wide range of stakeholders and the sociological, legal, environmental and political factors that are in play. Additional internal complexities include how the project interfaces with other change initiatives, the range of technical disciplines and approaches required and the geography and culture – including the language – of both the delivery teams and the business community affected by the project.

How is a successful project leader made?

Project managers are not all created equal and the journey to become a project manager is not a formally defined one. When asked, most will say that they drifted into project management in an unplanned way probably taking part in small project initiatives and working their way up to taking an increased level of responsibility. This is different in every case and what one organisation calls a project may not even register as a project with another.

There are generally three identifiable stages of developing a senior project manager, transforming a project manager with foundation-level project management skills and knowledge to someone capable of taking a leading role in change across the organisation.

These three key stages in the development route map of a project leader start with training in the basic process disciplines of project management using well-established methods to deliver a self-contained small-scale project. The second stage, as the project manager gains in skill and experience, would be having full financial accountability to deliver a large-scale output working with a team of people and developing the softer skills of project management.

Finally, the experienced project manager will find themselves leading a significant transformational change using all the skills they have developed to ensure that the stakeholder community at all levels is engaged and contributing to success. The skills required and used to deliver results will be quite different at each of the three stages of project manager development.

Super project managers

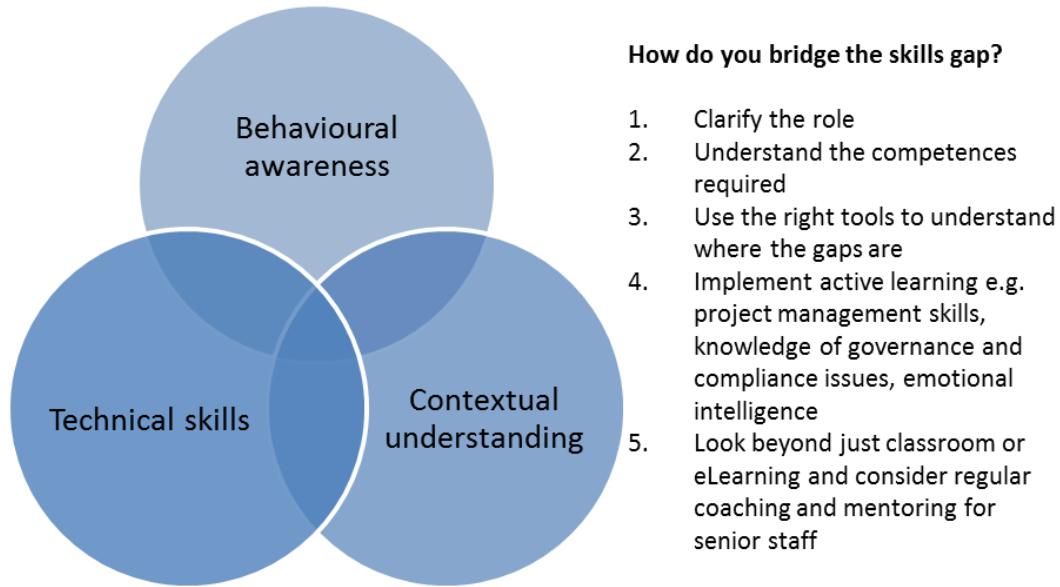
However, this well-established development route map for project managers is experiencing significant challenge. There have been senior executive leaders of projects and there have been project managers but now the role of project leader is appearing in between them. Typically the project manager runs things on a day-to-day basis while the senior responsible owner makes the key decisions and is ultimately accountable for the success or failure of the project. Over the past few years it has become increasingly apparent that there is a middle ground between the roles of the project manager and the senior executive sponsoring the project. There is an emerging recognition that that middle ground does need to be occupied by a project lead or leader.

Some organisations have spotted this gap and have started to introduce a role that they are calling ‘project director’ that is more of a hands-on role than the executive and frees up the executive from some of the work, while providing some of the senior oversight that the project manager does not always have. The skillset of this project leader is even more aligned to transformational objectives.

This new role brings contextual understanding to the skillset of the traditional project manager. Project managers usually start with training on project management techniques and tools then may get some training in behavioural skills. Organisations must now look beyond this and ensure that their project leaders understand the context of major programmes and projects, which elements are central to the project leader and which should remain within the remit of the project manager.

Identify skills gaps

How should organisations go about identifying what skills gaps might exist in their senior project leadership? Treading carefully and sensitively it is important to engage senior executives – who might understandably feel they can already demonstrate all the skills needed – in the need for personal and professional development. The first step is to put in place a competency assessment to identify aptitude and provide a baseline for development. Focussing on the need for soft skills development, personality profiling can give executives a fresh insight into their approach to people. A more formal appraisal may contribute to determining current performance and behaviours. A demographics-based analysis of a senior executive's skills and competencies would also help with planning for future problems and challenges that might arise as the executive takes on the role of super project manager.



A skills gap analysis is likely to reveal that this new project leader may need development in a number of competencies and skills, even if they already have valuable skills as a member of the senior executive. Many of the soft skills needed are value based such as honesty and integrity and will also include, qualities of leadership including communication, confidence, commitment, positive attitude, creativity, intuition, ability to inspire and a sense of humour. They also include leadership competencies such as strategy planning and ability to delegate.

All of these competencies and skills should be encompassed within the contextual understanding that makes leading a major transformational programme more challenging. Addressing the skills gap at this level has to be handled with rather more thoughtfulness than simply plugging them with a training course or two. In fact, at the more senior level, organisations cannot expect to send people on training courses as executives rarely have the time or inclination to attend them. Instead, at this level, more effective development can come through 30-minute personalised sessions of coaching and mentoring which tweak existing capability to fit within the context of programme and project management.

Fostering emotional intelligence

Only one in five project managers is being trained on soft skills and emotional intelligence (19 percent), according to research¹. Yet projects are too often driven by managers who lack people skills or struggle to build relationships across a number of stakeholders. Among their biggest challenges, project managers cited, “meeting the needs of working with larger, multidisciplinary teams across multiple locations and countries” (42 percent of respondents). Often teams are dispersed and members of a team may rarely meet in person. Achieving organisational success against this backdrop will demand a fresh approach – it is no longer enough to rely on professional qualifications, but rather fostering creativity, innovation and teamwork in super project managers to build a thriving organisation.

Strategies for success

There are seven strategies for success that organisations can adopt to ensure project managers are developing to meet needs:

1. Build a true profession of project management that both runs alongside the core business and is integrated into it.
2. Create a professional structure that recognises and differentiates between the different levels of project management and leadership.
3. Assess existing and prospective members of the profession against this model;
4. Grow and nurture internal talent to fill future needs. However appoint only from within the organisation where you are confident that the individual has the aptitude to succeed.
5. Monitor behaviour and review competence and performance regularly;
6. Categorise your projects to ensure that the most capable project leaders are only utilised on the most worthy projects and to provide a route map for more junior project managers to progress.

7. Use coaching and mentoring for effective development for your most senior staff and emerging super project managers.

With these strategies in place, organisations should be all set to develop senior project management talent that is capable of leading the organisation successfully through complex change.

Reference

¹ Insynergi 2014 survey, 'Understanding why projects and programmes may fail', was conducted by independent technology market research specialists Vanson Bourne in February 2014. 100+ senior IT managers and directors were surveyed among organisations of a workforce of 1001 – 3,000 and 3,000+ in the UK.

About the Author



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