

Project Managers: A Team Member's Perspective¹

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Abstract

While the Project Manager role and competencies have been addressed in various studies (PMI, 2007, Brill, Bishop, and Walker, 2006, El-Sabaa, 2001, Crawford, 2000, Patterson, 1991), none of these studies was based on answers provided by project team members. This is peculiar, since although the important contribution made by project team members to project success is widely recognized (Shenhar et al., 2002) little or no attention has been devoted to listening to their voices.

In order to obviate this shortcoming, this study focused on how project team members evaluate the project manager role and behaviours. A questionnaire was sent to more than 1000 people, 108 were considered valid.

Among the findings we can mention that team members consider the project manager role very important but did not consider many of the project managers they worked with suitable for the role. In addition, the more senior the team member, the less important they consider the project manager role to be. This is especially true for male respondents. As expected, team members consider being assigned clear objectives by the project manager to be fundamental, but contrary to the dominant project management literature, team members also consider fundamental managers' possession of technical skills aligned to the project domain.

Key words: *project team members, project manager appraisal, project followership.*

JEL code: M54

Introduction

By screening books and papers addressing project management topics, it can be noted that most publications are aimed at project managers and, more generally, those responsible for coordinating complex and innovative initiatives. Project management literature had shown that without the support of senior management it is more difficult for a project manager to manage a project (Kerzner H., 1987, Pinto J.K. and Slevin D.P., 1987). For this reason, other publications then appeared, targeted to the senior management which commissions and sponsors the projects. By limiting our analysis to books we can mention: Archibald R. D. and

¹ *Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally presented at the 4th Scientific Conference on Project Management in the Baltic States, University of Latvia, April 2015. It is republished here with the permission of the author and conference organizers.*

Archibald S. C., 2013, West D., 2010, Englund R. L. and Bucero A., 2006, Love A. L. and Love J. B. 2000.

However, other publications recognize the importance of the project team as key variable in project environments. What these latter publications have in common is that they are still addressed to Project Managers, since they provide hints for them on how to lead, motivate, and manage project teams (DeMarco T. and Lister T., 2013, Brown K. and Hyer N., 2009, Wong Z., 2007, Loo R., 2003).

To date, the important contribution project team members make toward project success is widely recognized (see Shenhar et al., 2002, which linked the project team to project success) but, at the same time, project teams and team members are considered “objects” that the project manager should manage properly. Little or no attention has been devoted to listening to team members’ voices. (Sampietro M. and Villa T., 2014).

Since team members are at least the executors of the project tasks, understanding how they evaluate the project environment in which they operate is important; indeed, misalignments between project sponsors, project managers, and project team members may lead to poor project performance and an unsatisfactory organizational climate, thus limiting the ability to consistently repeat project success in future initiatives.

As a first step in this direction, we carried out a study focused on how project team members evaluate the project manager role and project managers’ behaviours. In the current literature there are several studies related to the role and competencies of project managers (PMI, 2007, Brill, Bishop, and Walker, 2006, El-Sabaa, 2001, Crawford, 2000, Patterson, 1991) but none of them are based on the perceptions/evaluations of team members.

A questionnaire composed of 38 variables in the form of statements and an additional 9 control variables was sent to more than 1000 people. A convenience sample method was used. 312 people responded to the survey but only 140 questionnaires were considered relevant for our study. In fact, only questionnaires completed by pure team members (i.e. people who had never had the opportunity of being project managers) were considered aligned with the purpose of the study. Among them, 108 were considered valid given that the remainder were too incomplete.

In this paper we will discuss the part of the survey related to how team members consider the role of the project manager, and how they evaluate them. This part was composed of 14 statements and 5 control variables (age, working experience, gender, percentage of time working in project environments, and if the respondent supervised other people). Respondents had to rate the agreement with the proposed statements on a 1 to 7 scale (1 completely disagree, 7 completely agree).

Research results and discussion

Of the 108 respondents, 59 were men and 49 women. The average age was 33.77 years while the average working experience was 8.14 years. They were also asked if they had responsibility for junior staff: 51 answered affirmatively while 56 declared they had no

subordinates. Finally, they were asked to estimate the percentage of time they spent working as team members in project environments. On average the respondents dedicated 60% of their time working as team members.

The core of the survey presented statements related to how team members evaluated the project manager role and the project managers they worked with. The statements together with the number of valid cases, the mean score, and standard deviation are reported in table 1.

Table 1: Statements, mean score and standard deviation

ID	Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Having a Project Manager (PM) is critical for project success	108	5.36	1.683
2	PMs that I have been working with were critical for project success	108	4.28	1.64
3	The role of the PM is not easy at all	107	5.68	1.233
4	To me, roles and responsibilities of PMs are clear	105	4.60	1.644
5	The PM should clearly define my roles and responsibilities	107	5.36	1.348
6	The PM should communicate clear objectives	108	6.15	0.975
7	The PM should be able to motivate me	107	5.89	1.102
8	A PM should have technical skills related to the project	106	5.63	1.19
9	A PM should know my job	106	5.63	1.245
10	The PM does not take time to listen my ideas	106	3.16	1.461
11	The PM asks (expects) too much from me	107	3.20	1.383
12	The PM uses my ideas without giving credit to me	107	3.19	1.689
13	The PM decides my deadlines without taking into consideration my agenda/schedule	107	3.79	1.775
14	The PM does not give me freedom to select the best way to solve a problem	106	3.29	1.561

Source: *Author calculations based on survey data*

As mentioned in the introduction, there is a vast body of knowledge targeted to project managers but by looking at the literature related to success factors in project environments (Shenhar, Tishler, Dvir, Lipovetsky, and Lechler, 2002, Baker, Murphey, and Fisher, 1998, Black, 1996, Pinto and Mantel, 1990, Pinto and Slevin 1988), it emerges that project managers are rarely mentioned among the variables that contribute to project success. As Turner and Müller (2005, p. 59) pointed out: “The literature on project success factors has largely ignored the impact of the project manager, and his or her leadership style and competencies, on project success. This may be because most of the studies ask their opinion and the respondents have not given due consideration to their own impact on project success.

Or, it may be because the studies have not measured the impact of the project managers and, thus, not recorded it. Or, it maybe because of the project manager has not impact. However, that last conclusion is in direct contrast with the general management literature, which

postulates that the leadership style and the competence of the manager have a direct and measurable impact on the performance of the organization or business”.

By looking at statement 1 it seems that team members agree on the importance of the project manager role since the mean score is 5.34 with 69% of the respondents providing scores equal to 6 or 7.

However the results are quite different if we move from theory to practice. In fact, while there is consensus on the importance of the PM role to achieve project success, real work experiences lead to a different evaluation. Statement 2, in fact, reported a mean score equal to 4.28. It is interesting to note the frequency distribution of the responses (Figure 1). It can be observed that there is a polarization on how team members evaluate project managers they had worked with. In fact, 39% of the respondents disagreed with the statement (score <4) while 49% agreed with the statement (score >4), only 13% reported a neutral evaluation (total does not equal to 100 due to rounding).

An interesting scenario emerges in which team members do not need to be convinced of the importance of the project manager role while the current characteristics of the people in charge of the management of the project only partially fit to the potentiality of the role.

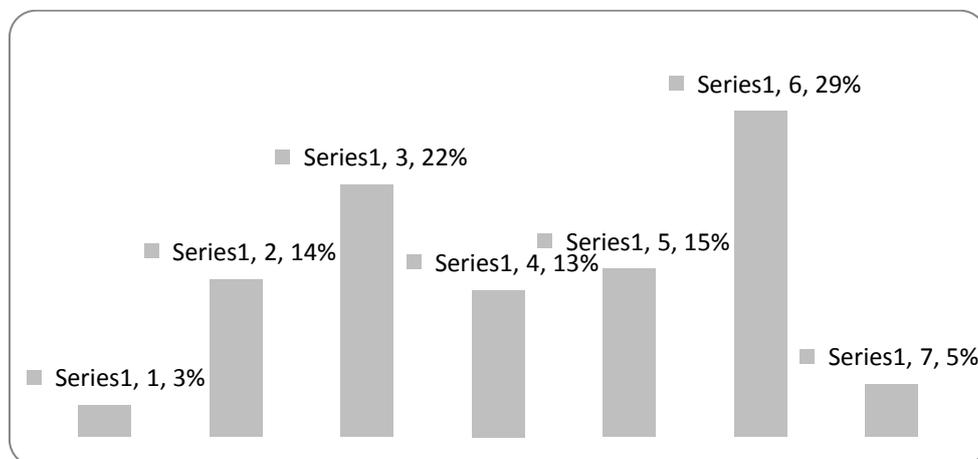


Fig.1: PMs that I have been working with were critical for project success

Source: Author calculations based on survey data

While the result of statement 2 does not depict an ideal or satisfactory situation, team members also recognized that being a project manager (statement 3) is not an easy task (M=5.68). These results stress the importance of carefully selecting project managers able to effectively fulfil their role. In addition, room for improvement can be also seen after consideration of statement 4, in fact, while team members recognize the importance of the project manager role, on the other hand the role is not clear for 30% of the respondents (score<4). For this reason, organisations may benefit from clearly defining what team members should expect from a project manager in general and for specific projects in particular.

Focusing on what a project manager should do, statements 5, 6, and 7 confirm what is well known in the project management literature. It is worth mentioning that the highest mean score of statement 6 “The PM should communicate clear objectives” (M=6.15), is statistically different ($p < 0.05$) from all the other mean score values. This is aligned with studies of Critical Success Factors in project environments, which very often cite clear objectives among the most important factors to achieve project success.

Statement 8, “A PM should have technical skills related to the project”, is quite interesting since the high mean score value reported in our study (M=5.63) differs from the mean score reported in similar statements in other studies on the competencies of the project manager.

For example, Brill, Bishop, and Walker (2006) in their study of the competencies of effective project managers, reported that “Understands fields related to the project” had a mean score value of 3.38 on a scale from 1 to 5, ranking 74th out of 78 variables, and “Understands the industry in which he/she works” had a mean score of 3.71. Converting this value to a 1 to 7 scale, the resulting mean score values are 4.73 and 5.2 respectively, well below the 5.63 score reported in our study.

It has to be noted that in the Brill et al. study the sample was composed of project managers who had to rate how important the specific competencies and characteristics of project managers were to be effective in that role. Since in our study team members were the respondent, team members appear to place greater emphasis on the technical competencies of project managers than project managers do. Statement 9, “A PM should know my job” (M=5.63), with 71% of the respondents providing scores equal to 6 and 7, strengthens this interpretation.

The final part of the survey examined how team members evaluated the role of the project managers and their behaviours, focused on non-virtuous behaviours that project managers may adopt. Mean score values seem to suggest a fairly positive situation but the frequency tables indicate that 29% of the project team members reported that project managers used their ideas without giving credit to them (statement 12). Finally 40% of the respondents agreed (scores > 4) that project managers set deadlines without taking into consideration their agenda/schedule (statement 13). This result is particularly interesting, since a top-down approach in project scheduling, where the project manager defines the schedule and team members have just to comply with it, emerges quite frequently. This behaviour contrasts with project management good practice, which recommends developing the project schedule with project team members.

It should be noted that “bad practices” go together; in fact, the statistical analysis shows a medium to large correlation among statements 10, 12, 13, 14 and mixed correlations (from no correlation to small and medium correlation) between statement 11 and the others (see Table 2).

Table 2: Correlation analysis between statements 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14

		The PM does not take time to listen my ideas	The PM asks (expects) too much from me	The PM uses my ideas without giving credit to me	The PM decides my deadlines without taking into consideration my agenda/ schedule	The PM does not give me freedom to select the best way to solve a problem
The PM does not take time to listen my ideas	Pearson Correlation	1	0.407**	0.453**	0.365**	0.524**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	106	106	106	106	105
The PM asks (expects) too much from me	Pearson Correlation	0.407**	1	0.263**	0.117	0.241*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		.006	0.229	0.013
	N	106	107	107	107	106
The PM uses my ideas without giving credit to me	Pearson Correlation	0.453**	0.263**	1	0.508**	0.543**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.006		0.000	0.000
	N	106	107	107	107	106
The PM decides my deadlines without taking into consideration my agenda/ schedule	Pearson Correlation	0.365**	0.117	0.508**	1	0.514**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.229	.000		0.000
	N	106	107	107	107	106
The PM does not give me freedom to select the best way to solve a problem	Pearson Correlation	0.524**	0.241*	0.543**	0.514**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.013	0.000	0.000	
	N	105	106	106	106	106

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: *Author calculations based on survey data*

Based on the correlation matrix, it emerges that statements 10 to 14 might be considered to be parts of a single item. For this reason a Factor Analysis was carried out.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Table 3) indicate that the data set is suitable for factor analysis.

Table 3: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.771
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	131.463
	Df	10
	Sig.	0

Source: Author calculations based on survey data

The Kaiser criterion suggests that only one component has to be extracted (Figure 2) explaining 51.7% of variance (Table 4).

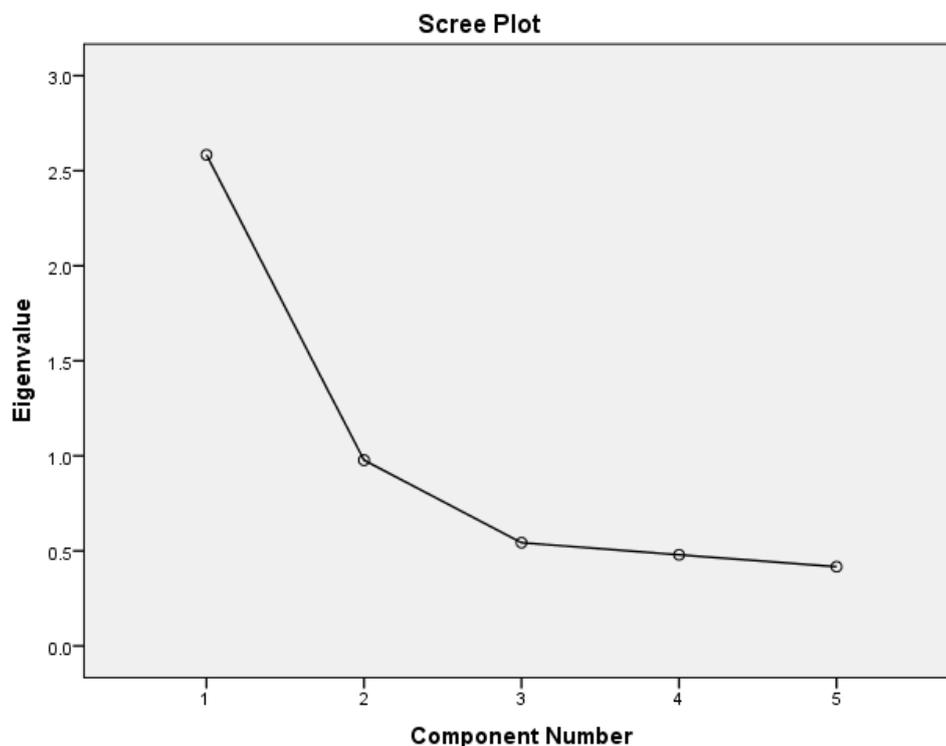


Fig. 2: Scree plot of the components related to statements 10 to 14

Source: Author calculations based on survey data

Table 4: Total Variance Explained by the component

Component	Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.584	51.675	51.675

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Source: Author calculations based on survey data

The Component Matrix (Table 5) indicates that all the variables are strongly loaded on the component, thus confirming the idea that “bad practices” go together.

Table 5: Component Matrix

	Component 1
The PM does not take time to listen my ideas	0.760
The PM asks (expects) too much from me	0.466
The PM uses my ideas without giving credit to me	0.783
The PM decides my deadlines without taking into consideration my agenda/schedule	0.713
The PM does not give me freedom to select the best way to solve a problem	0.817
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.	
a. 1 components extracted.	

Source: *Author calculations based on survey data*

The survey included five control variables. One asked if the respondent, in his/her daily job, supervised other people. An independent t-test was conducted to test if, given their role as coordinators, people with subordinates provided different answers to people with no subordinates. No statistically significant mean score difference was found for any of the 14 variables. This result was unexpected; indeed, it had seemed reasonable to assume that people used to leading other people would have a different perception of the project manager role, especially when it comes to rating the difficulty of the role, or its importance.

Another control variable was the working experience in years. By performing a correlation analysis this variable had a medium correlation ($r=-0.328$) with the statement 1 (Having a Project Manager is critical for project success), indicating that the more experienced a team member is, the more he/she thinks that project managers do not increase the ability to attain project success. In this case there are gender differences; in fact, men and women show different results (Table 6) showing that women believe more in project managers even when they are experienced professionals.

Table 6: Correlation between Work experience and having a Project Manager is critical for project success

			Having a Project Manager (PM) is critical for project success
Men	Work Experience	Pearson Correlation	-0.397**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002
		N.	57
Women	Work Experience	Pearson Correlation	-0.190
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.197
		N	48

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Source: *Author calculations based on survey data*

This difference between men and women is even stronger if the age of the respondents is used as control variable. While it is obvious that Age and Work experience are correlated ($r=0.943$, $p<0.01$), it is not so obvious that age creates more differences in the evaluation of the usefulness of project managers than working experience (Table 7). This means that age by itself has a negative influence on how male team members consider project managers.

Table 7: Correlation between Age and Having a Project Manager is critical for project success

		Having a Project Manager (PM) is critical for project success	
Men	Age	Pearson Correlation	-0.422**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001
		N	58
Women	Age	Pearson Correlation	-0.012
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.937
		N	49

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Author calculations based on survey data

The same analysis was carried out with gender as control variable. In this case only item 9 (A PM should know my job) showed a statistically significant mean score difference. The results of the test are reported in table 8..

Table 8: Independent sample t-test between genders for the variable “A PM should know my job”

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
A PM should know my job	Equal variances assumed	7.992	0.006	-2.37	103	0.020	-0.555	0.235	-1.020	-0.090
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.43	100.304	.017	-0.555	0.228	-1.007	-0.103

Source: Author calculations based on survey data

It seems that women prefer project managers that try to know better their team members. This result might be explained by suggesting that asking to know more about project team members may ease the creation of good relationships with the project manager and by noting that gender and workplace literature reports that women are more sensitive about workplace

relationships than men. This interpretation seems to be supported by the Correlation Analysis (Table 9) between “The PM should be able to motivate me” and “A PM should know my job”. At the sample level the correlation is moderate ($r=0.356$, $p<0.01$), while the results are quite different when the sample is split by gender. In fact, men do not show a statistically significant correlation between the two variables while women show a high correlation ($r=0.593$, $p<0.01$).

Table 9: Correlation Analysis between the variables “The PM should be able to motivate me” and “A PM should know my job”

Gender			The PM should be able to motivate me	A PM should know my job
Male	The PM should be able to motivate me	Pearson Correlation	1	0.160
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.233
		N	58	57
	A PM should know my job	Pearson Correlation	0.160	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.233	
		N	57	57
Female	The PM should be able to motivate me	Pearson Correlation	1	0.593
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
		N	48	48
	A PM should know my job	Pearson Correlation	0.593	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
		N	48	48

Source: Author calculations based on survey data

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

The point of view of project team members has been almost neglected in the project management literature. This research has started to fill the gap.

The main findings can be summarized as follows:

- Project team members consider the role of the project manager critical for project success. They also think that the role of the project manager is difficult. These results can be considered positive, since the opposite would have brought into question the efforts of project management researchers, trainers, educators, and organizations (e.g. PMI, IPMA, etc.) in studying, developing, promoting, and certifying the project manager role.
- Many project team members are not satisfied with the project managers they have worked with. This result suggests that organisations should increase their efforts to carefully select and develop project managers.
- Project team members expect to receive clear objectives from project managers. Having clear objectives is very often cited as top priority in the literature on project success factors; this study confirms that team members believe this too.

- Team members want project managers with technical competencies. This result is particularly interesting since the current literature on the competencies of project managers seems to underestimate the importance of technical skills. Maybe the role of the project manager should be better explained to them.
- Men, and seasoned team members, are more skeptical about the ability of the project manager to contribute to project success. Maybe they think that having a lot of experience can replace the need for a project manager or maybe it is just a question of not accepting supervision after a long career, or maybe is just envy for a role they wish to have.

This study has some limitations. The first limitation is related to the sample size: 108 valid cases cannot be considered a large sample, and for this reason generalizations have to be careful. The second limitation is in the sampling method (convenience sample), which makes it more important to have large samples to be able to generalize the results. The third limitation is that statements 10 to 14 are only a very partial list of “non-virtuous” behaviours that project managers might adopt. This shortcoming reduces the possibility of fully implementing Factor Analysis and Regression Analysis, thus limiting the ability to discover interesting relationships among variables.

Given the novelty of the topics addressed in this study, future researches needed to validate the results. In general, research efforts are needed in the field of project followership (this term has been used by some authors and trainers to indicate project management considered from the perspective of team members) since team members are scarcely considered in the current project management literature.

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Marco Sampietro has been a professor at SDA Bocconi School of Management, Bocconi University, Milan, Italy since 2000. SDA Bocconi is ranked among the top Business Schools in the world (Financial Times Rankings). He is a Core Faculty Member and teaches Project Management in the following programs: MBA – Master of Business Administration, EMBA – Executive Master of Business Administration, GEMBA – Global Executive Master of Business Administration. He is also responsible of the executive education course: IT Project Management. He is also a Faculty Member at MISB – Mumbai International School of Business, the Indian subsidiary of Bocconi University. He has been teaching Project Management, IT Management, and Computer Skills for Economics at Bocconi University since 2001. In 2008 and 2009 he was Vice-Director of a Masters' Degree in IT Management at Bocconi University. He also teaches Project Management at the Milano Fashion Institute.

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