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Successful Projects and the Eight Compelling Behaviours
Advances in Project Management
Series Article   by Martin Price

Advances in Project Management Series[1]

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By Martin Price

You'll be cut off at the pass if you let yourself rely on standard processes, tools and templates. These, however well chosen, are not enough to manage a project. The quality of working practices, ingenuity, judgement, leadership and cultural factors are at least as important. Today the word on the street is that the behaviour of project players is decisive for achieving the pace of progress and reliability that customers and users expect. This is a reality that is sometimes overlooked and even disregarded. It is through the strengthening of players' behaviour, as individuals and as groups, that the greatest opportunities for advancing project management capability are to be found.

Projects as 'social endeavours'

The lecturer on a recent project management course explained this matter in a different way. She said "in managing a project there is only behaviour; the rest is administration". Today we find ourselves talking about the importance of 'soft-skills', 'culture', 'values', 'teamwork', 'pacing progress', 'adaptation', 'endurance', 'emotional intelligence' and of project management as a social endeavour.

Many of the most experienced project managers are now coming out to voice their views on the importance of the behaviour of project players and their organisation. They are reporting that a strong human and organisational capability can itself substantially underwrite project performance and reliability.

Too many projects fail to deliver on their promises and when there is disruption, it is rare that the difficulties are attributable to errors in the choices of methodology, tools or technique. To achieve the expected pace of progress, projects depend principally on a series of decision chains. Errors or misjudgements made anywhere along these chains, failure to then spot them or to address the consequential issues, will lead to delay, rework and the waste of resources. Because of its complexities and uncertainties, there is no field of human endeavour where behaviour is more crucial than in the management of a project organisation. Here, improvement to decision-making can be achieved in a number of ways.

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[1]The Advances in Project Management series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. Information about the Gower series can be found at http://www.gowerpublishing.com/advancesinprojectmanagement. See the author's profile at the end of this article.

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More sure-footed

One way is to rely on the old style school of hard knocks. While often providing a theatre for powerful learning, such events have to be derived from poor practices. They bring improvements that are too slow in the making. In today's competitive markets we have to be pre-emptive and more sure-footed; always primed for adaptation to any plan.

Another way is to leave less to chance and more to professional skill. A lesson can be taken here from the principles of 'lean production' as practiced in manufacturing. Here activities recognised to be insignificant are excluded from the schedule; leaving only the tasks recognised to be indispensible. But of course many of the actions required when managing a project cannot be prescribed, with many emerging for the first time during the execution phase. Instead, it is through the shrewd behaviour of players that a project's issues that centre on uncertainty, complexity and re-planning have to be resolved.

Using this same principle of 'rejecting the dispensable' in managing a project, it would surely be advantageous for players to align their behaviour in a way benefiting from useful practice as found in the most successful project regimes, i.e. those behaviours that have shown themselves to be successful. A project lives: adapting and growing as it responds to events and to what it learns from the situations and the experiences that these provide. Good practice is habituated where and when there is a quality of practice and distinctive performance.

Pragmatism and behaviour

Uncertainty and complexity, while found in many aspects of human endeavour, are a central concern in project management; with these twin devils both poised to disrupt progress. Players have to be alert; often recognising them as primary risks to their project. You need to be systematic but you must also be pragmatic; relying on a good understanding of human and organisational behaviour. Pragmatism is a reasoned and logical way of doing things or in working out what needs to be done. And here, attention to a particular situation will lead to options that include those that are less constrained by formal principles and standards.

A taxonomy or 'code of conduct' for pragmatism in project management is offered here as a 'Methodology of Compelling Behaviour' – as described below.

A Methodology of Compelling Behaviour

Project management practitioners are familiar with the idea of methodology as it is applied to the systematic and procedural aspects of their work. Offered here is an equivalent framework to accommodate the human and organisational aspects of managing projects.

The range of behaviours that might be relevant to managing a project are boundless and eclectic and this makes it impractical for the whole field to be available at any one time. An alternative approach then is to separate-out the human and

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organisational behaviours that are most commonly associated with successful project management practice. This way, we can identify the most positive or 'compelling' behaviours' as they are distinguished in project management when conducted at its best. (This is an approach adopted by Stephen Covey in his book 'Seven Habits of Highly Effective People'.)

The Eight Compelling Behaviours of a capable project management regime.

The behaviours are imagined here as conducted in an ideal way. They are thumbnails only and are not mutually exclusive.

1. IMAGINE *responses that are primed and ready*

Summary: Players are curious and persistent in their enquiries and networking. They seek to connect with other players and to discover issues, shared values and remedies to reach goals through the pursuit of common purpose and commitment.

Players are:
- known, valued and skilful in their reasoning
- networked, persuasive and articulate
- persistent, curious and resolute
- practised and open-minded
- determined and enterprising

2. IMAGINE *capable and professional players*

Summary: The expectations of players are high, of themselves and others. People's ability confers status and this is celebrated. 'Key Competencies' are evident. Players are professionally trained and qualified. Mentoring is regular and is conducted in ways that are both formal and informal. Players have wide experience; equipping them with keen judgment and a healthy skepticism.

Players are:
- proficient in 'key competencies'
- well-equipped to perform in their roles
- experienced and persistent in their learning
- systematic and rational
- accountable and open to candour

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3. IMAGINE *collective and close-coupled action*

Summary: The best possible results cannot be achieved without collective effort that is the result of an enduring work ethos. Dialogue is the life-blood that feeds the choices of what is to be done and how. Status stems from knowledge and information that is shared.

Players are:
- engaged in regular and active dialogue
- surfacing issues and jointly addressing them
- willing to side-line self interests
- sharing news of progress and managing pace
- connecting the dependencies

4. IMAGINE *adapting effectively to the unexpected*

Summary: The regime adapts to change without delay. Players are accomplished at managing and accommodating change. Re-planning is thorough and recognises the new circumstances. Responsibility for adaptation is devolved for local decision-making.

Players are:
- recognising that change is a regular matter
- tracking the big picture and pace of progress
- leading organisational changes
- keeping stakeholders aware and informed
- learning with all those who are involved

5. IMAGINE *solutions resolved by social engagement*

Summary: Strong and sustainable ideas, goals and plans are the products of social engagement. Choices and solutions are produced from players pooling their experience, interests and skills. The outcomes of social engagement enable robust collaboration between groups.

Players are:
- always aware of a project's purpose and goals
- conducting and encouraging social interaction
- encouraged to question the rationale behind any proposition
- promoting social engagement throughout the project regime
- continually enhancing the quality of their social engagement

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6. IMAGINE *pervasive leadership*

Summary: Managing pace and exploiting innovation depends on the player's contribution as leaders. Localised leadership should result in prompt and well-informed decisions. This behaviour relies on a common ethos throughout the regime and working relationships that are mature and robust.

Players are:
- working with others to agree and achieve goals
- expecting active leadership from every player
- exploring and facilitating engagement with the critical questions
- continually seeking better ways to progress
- supported in improving their own ability as leaders

7. IMAGINE *strong partnering*

Summary: Partnerships, stakeholder agreements, joint ventures, outsourcing arrangements, alliances and similar arrangements depend on trust, candour and flexibility to sustain the contract. Regular review, reflection and sensitivity to the preferences and ambitions of all parties are important.

Players are:
- continually discovering what is to be done and how
- building on the strength of the interests in common
- negotiating durable terms and working relationships
- aware of knowledge, skills and resource limitations
- regularly assessing pace in terms of speed and quality

8. IMAGINE *capability that is continually improved*

Summary: The practice of continuous improvement is a regular regime pre-occupation and buried deeply in its work ethos. Improvements to what is done and how it is done add to a project regime's maturity.

Players are:
- anticipating where an improvement idea could be important
- discovering and resolving issues collectively
- ensuring that innovation is implemented effectively
- discovering and securing a more mature project regime
- winning competitive advantage through innovation

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A project organisation reaches its greatest possible capability when there is a synergy that combines the efficacy of systems and methodology with human and organisational capability. In the conduct of the latter, many project management regimes are found from their results, to be wanting. Greater attention is needed to the training and development of practitioners and their organisations. This is an arena where much of the most critical learning is acquired in some way experientially or learned 'on-the-job'. Many of the principles of Action Learning (originally devised by Reg Revans) could be usefully applied.

About the Author

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Martin Price is widely known as a speaker and writer and for his fresh ideas on human and organisational behaviour so crucial to the success of managing a project. He was Director of Professional Development for PMIs UK Chapter and for six years hosted PMIs monthly UK Chapter meetings in London.

Martin worked as an electrical engineer before spending 15 years as a personnel manager and then as a change management consultant with PA Consulting Group. There he enabled and supported the transformation of large and small businesses.

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