

Resilience – A key enabler for Project Success

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Abstract

Success and Failures are very much integral part of our lives and Project Management is no different. Some PMs are known to over carry the baggage of their past happenings and ruin their professional career fearing about reoccurrence of their past event. In pursuit of excellence, it is important that we follow a simple principle advocated by Anthony Robbins - ***Focus on where we want to go, not on what we fear.*** Our ability to bounce back determines our success in long run.

Overwhelmed by our past experiences, we tend to over carry the setbacks and failures thereby cloud our minds and hamper our rational decision making. Developing resilience paves the way for bouncing back and doing away with the fear of failure.

The paper is based on the observations and discussions with the Project Managers (PMs) and other Stakeholders to identify the key enablers for the Project Success and the traits that distinguishes the performers and non-performers. An attempt has been made at bringing out the key areas of development leading to higher resilience – an important trait for successful project managers.

Key Words: Resilience, Resilient, Project Success, EQ, Failure, Setback

Introduction

We all have tasted success in our projects and at times we have also seen things not going our way resulting in setbacks and failures. The setbacks are known to set our clock back and deflate our confidence level. Moreover, we all have tendency to latch on to our past experiences which clouds our minds and blocks our rational decision making ability. As truly stated, life is simple, yet we make it complicated.

Often, we ruin our present pre-occupied with our past burdens and endlessly ponder over what the future holds for us. More so, overwhelmed by our past experiences, we tend to get stuck when faced with similar challenges and murmur “Oh! No, Not again”. Our fear about reoccurrence of the sad experiences and/or unpleasant situations encountered earlier stays on top of our mind. Worst of all, similar such thoughts continually keep chattering in our minds. As such, we miss on the opportunities which come our way disguised in the form of adversities.

“Occupied with negative self-talk, we get caught in the prison of our own making, we lose the ability to see ourselves, others or our environments as they really are. We see the world through filters that may not have basis in reality, and we begin to make decisions based on what we think rather than what is. We forget to engage in other kind of self-talk: hopeful, affirming thoughts about ourselves and compassion for others”. - Richard Boyatzis & Anne McKee¹

“All the adversity I’ve had in my life, all my troubles and obstacles, have strengthened me.”
Walt Disney

Importance of Resilience in Project Management

“We focus on the negatives, losing ourselves in the ‘problem.’ We point to our unhappy circumstances to rationalize our negative feelings. This is the easy way out. It takes, after all, very little effort to feel victimized.” Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

Research scientists have proved that overwhelmed by the unpleasant situations, we create barriers on our path to progress and the earlier we bounce back, the better it is for there is no one in this world who has not suffered failures/setbacks in their life time. Also, historical records prove that almost 90% of the business tycoons and other professionals in the corporate history belong to a set of individuals who have high resilience to bounce back clubbed with their tenacity to ride the wave and eventually emerge as winners.

Experts in Project Management have emphasized the need for proper planning. Here too, most of the organizations which have been successful in execution of multi-billion dollar mega projects attribute their success to Planning wherein the entire team is known to spend about 40% of their time on Project Planning, Monitoring & Controlling.

Today, the buzz in Project Management is - ***“Work out the Plans and Work to the Plans”***. Yet despite following the proven and time tested project guidelines and working within the Project Management framework, we do come across Project failures of various magnitudes with the projects having cost and time overruns. Project failures are not only strain on the country’s economy but also result in wasteful consumption of resources which could have been optimally deployed elsewhere resulting in contribution to country’s GDP. We have also witnessed that in some cases, the Project failures have had detrimental effect on the entire project team. In some cases failures have had larger ramifications leading to the individuals suffering from fear psychosis and depression. Key point here is not to get unduly concerned with the failures and stay put. It is commonly said that the failures are our best teachers. It is therefore important that we learn from the failures, bounce back and grab the opportunities which come our way.

“The flower that blooms in adversity is the rarest and most beautiful of all.” Walt Disney

After failing twice, Sir Edmond Hillary looking at Mt. Everest said: “I’ll come again and conquer you. Because as A Mountain you cannot grow. But As A Human I Can.”

The above quotes stress the importance of being resilient i.e. ability to bounce back and move ahead. Resilience therefore has been termed as an important ingredient in the recipe for Success. As remarked by His Holiness Dalai Lama, ***“Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck. Not everything that you desire will be necessarily good for you in the long run. If something just seems to not work out continually, in such a way that it seems almost like fate intervened, consider letting it go or coming back to it at another time. The Universe works in mysterious ways and should be trusted. Just be sure you are not mistaking your own failure as the Universe telling you something”.***

The quote ***“I don’t measure Man’s Success by how high he climbs but.. How high he bounces when he hits bottom.”*** – George S Patton Jr. brings out the need for PMs to develop their Resilience index. Success is not just driving on a beautiful concrete road but requires treading on a path encountering pot holes and speed breakers. In order to reach our destination and enjoy our ride, we need to carefully maneuver our vehicle and timely change the gears depending upon the situation. Similarly, while managing projects, we find that the environment is continually changing and so are the expectations of the Stakeholders. Moreover, these changes are fast paced requiring PMs to be more alert than ever before.

Factors leading to development of Resilience – Top Five

As mentioned earlier, having failed once does not mean that the PMs lack necessary skills and stays with his/her “Failure” tag throughout the life time. Consciously working on the following areas have helped PMs in development of resilience. Higher resilience has enabled PMs to see barriers as mere challenges, act with full vigor and strength to overcome the obstacles and attain success. It will not be exaggeration to state that Resilient PMs have learned to face the storm, acquired needed confidence to adjust their Sails, use the wind speed and its direction to their advantage so as to sail through the storm and reach their destination.

1. Purpose driven clubbed with Action oriented approach

Positive mind set clubbed with resilience are the two most important characteristics of resilient PMs who consider that every rising sun provides them with an opportunity for a fresh new day, they leave their baggage of past happenings and start the day afresh. More importantly, resilient PMs are purpose driven, quick to adapt themselves to the changing environment and realign their tasks and activities in the larger interest of the stakeholders. At times, it is observed that depending upon call of the situation, these PMs even subjugate their personal expectations.

Resilient PMs are action oriented rather than staying stuck ruminating over the past problem(s) and correlating those with the current problems. The resilient PMs are intrinsically motivated, action oriented and drive their energy from performing the activities. At the same time they are full of confidence and fully understand that No

decisions are 100% correct and that it is worthless to wait until 100% data is available in order to arrive at a decision. As such, they rely on the fact that the actions need to be periodically monitored, take timely corrective action and work around in case the decisions taken are not going to yield desired results. Once having taken up something, no matter how many obstacles/difficulties come their way, how many adverse circumstances they are required to face, the resilient PMs always think, “No, I will never leave it!, I have taken this task and I’ll see it through, I shall not be deterred by anything”.

2. Open minded and learning from mistakes

We all make mistakes. However, the resilient PMs not only learn from their own mistakes but also from the other’s mistakes. Wisdom is all about gaining knowledge and capitalizing from the learnings. Resilient PMs are quick to adopt their learnings from the past mistakes/failures and more importantly take care not to repeat their mistakes, this in fact is a sign of growth for the PMs. No one is born perfect, it is only with perfect practice that we learn to perfectly perform those activities. This eventually makes a difference between the success and the failure.

“You build on failure. You use it as a stepping stone. Close the door on the past. Don't dwell on your mistakes and let it have any of your energy, or any of your time, or any of your space” - Johnny Cash

In one of the project involving transportation of heavy machinery, the local authorities did not give permission to the contractor for using the bridges connecting site and the port as they feared that the bridges were quite old and had weak supporting structure. The contractor engaged a local agency to construct a by-pass below the bridge, however after about 50% machinery was transported, the water level rose quite high due to incessant rains and the temporary structure was washed away. This resulted in inordinate delay in project execution and associated cost and time overruns. However, the client’s PM learnt important lessons and we have always seen him doing two things – 1) Validation of Assumptions and 2) Have a Plan B (backup plan). These have helped the PM to proactively mitigate the risks without blaming others, stay in control of the situations and more importantly prevent flaring up of tempers for the Stakeholders.

3. Higher Awareness – Self & Others

While executing projects, we have observed that when encountering an unpleasant situation (things not going as per plans or conflicts within the team), the PMs with high EQ are known to adopt a traffic light approach “PAUSE-REFLECT-RESPONSE”, this enables them to stay cool, review the situation and respond rather than losing their cool and acting with knee jerk reactions.

Raising the level of EQ and working with higher EQ has helped many PMs in enhancing their Self Awareness, Social awareness, Self-Regulation and Relationship Management. These four domains serve as the basic pillars for development of the fifth domain i.e. Team Leadership.

The importance of higher self-awareness and social awareness has been beautifully brought out by Daniel Goleman in his quote below –

“If your emotional abilities aren't in hand, if you don't have self-awareness, if you are not able to manage your distressing emotions, if you can't have empathy and have effective relationships, then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far”.
Daniel Goleman



Fig – 1: Five domains of EQ

4. Adaptability to changing environment

“Be the change you want to see in others”, Mahatma Gandhi

Today, the changes occurring in the environment are fast paced and one needs to adapt the changing environment else run the risk of being left high and dry on the abandoned beaches of yesterday. Digitization and sustaining in Digi-age have only placed higher challenges which seem to multiply with every passing day. As such what worked effectively yesterday is not the guarantee that the same plans/actions would yield same positive end results. We need to keep pace with the changes and align ourselves with the working culture specially while working on the global projects.

Today, working on global projects has become norm of the day and it calls for working with cross cultural and cross functional team members. This again possesses challenges in form of working with team members coming from diverse cultural backgrounds. Not only their values, tastes are different but their expectations are also diverse in nature. Working rigidly and adapting “My way or highway” have proven to be detrimental in the long run. It is therefore important particularly for the PMs who work on global projects and have the team members from diverse culture to dovetail their working styles by quickly adapting the local laws of land and above all act with higher cultural sensitiveness.

5. Higher Internal locus of control and higher self-esteem

PMs with higher Internal Locus Of Control (ILOC) are observed to have higher confidence in their abilities, belief in themselves and walk the talk. They are known to operate from the premise that they are responsible for their decisions and the outcomes as opposed to those belonging to the other group i.e. External locus of control (ELOC). PMs belonging to ELOC believe that their decisions are governed by the environmental factors over which they do not have influence/control.

PMs with higher ILOC do not get perturbed with the changes in the environment and take their own decisions. Although, they are open to suggestions and expert advice from others, but they do not seek approval from others to move ahead. However, PMs belonging to ELOC group not only go by others' opinions but also seek approval at almost every step. Moreover, if things do not go their way, they start to blame the environment and other factors for not achieving their goals, incidentally these two are the root causes of brewing misunderstandings, loss of team spirit and team conflicts.

“Your comments don't bother me anymore, to put me down you need my approval” – Anonymous

Conclusion

Success and failures are integral part of our lives. We all come across setbacks/failures in our lives and Project Management is no different. We do come across projects wherein despite our best efforts, sometimes things do not work out as per plans, thanks to Mr. Murphy for his undesirable interference and acts leading to the outcomes that are far below the SHs expectations culminating in project failures. However, this does not mean that we stay with “Failure” tag throughout our professional career over carrying our past baggage. The longer we hold the baggage, the more painful it becomes. The tendency on part of some of the PMs to stay put and thinking “down and out” can easily be overcome by building up our resilience i.e. our capacity to bounce back with tenacity and perseverance.

PMs are assets for any organization and while other assets depreciate over the period, human resources are the only assets which appreciate over the period. PMs and team members essentially are critical mass for the organization and they only grow and mature over a period capitalizing on their experience and learnings. Purpose driven; Open minded; Higher EQ; Adaptability to change; and Internal locus of control are the top five factors which have helped us in developing the resilience for our PM group.

PMs with higher resilience do not get easily perturbed with the past happenings and draw upon the lessons learned from their past failures/mistakes. Resilient PMs are found to be more purpose driven, they take ownership and responsibility for their decisions and attribute their success/failure to their decisions rather than blaming it on their fate and/or external environment over which they do not have control.

To end, the quotes below re-emphasizes the need to accept and acknowledge that ups and downs are integral part of our lives and that we have to learn to be leave our past behind if we have to grow:

“Ups and downs in life are very important to keep us going, because a straight line even in an electrocardiogram (ECG) means we are not alive”. – Ratan Tata

"No growth is possible unless there is a willingness to drop out of our previous conditions and accept the ampler status of the new conditions. If the bud is not ready to end its present state, how can it grow and unfold itself to become flower?" - Swami Chinmayanandaji

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