

How to Get Executives to Act for Project Success

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ABSTRACT

Even world-class project managers will not succeed unless they get their **executives to act for project success**. The trap of applying best-practice project management only to have the project fail because of executive inaction or counteraction can be avoided. According to the latest *PMI Pulse of the Profession* report (PMI, 2017), "actively engaged executives continue to be the top driver of whether projects met their original goals and business intent." Increasing numbers of project managers are trying to deal with this reality.

This is a **how-to paper**. It describes how project managers can get their executives to act, and it identifies executive actions most likely to contribute to project success. This paper explores why the evolving and expanding definition of project success and why the expanding complexity of projects have led to an environment in which the project manager is ever more dependent on the executive. It draws upon recent research about top-performing project managers, about why executives fail, and about why new products fail, to identify the basis for a strong mutual partnership between project managers and executives. A central theme is that project managers are **empowered to extend their influence** beyond the immediate project boundaries, not only to get their executives to act, but also to help implement the actions as well.

THE PROBLEM

Project managers who continue doing what used to work by focusing within the bounds of the project are now finding success more difficult to achieve. The problem is that project success is dependent, to an increasing degree, not only on the efforts of the project manager, but also on the efforts of the executive, as depicted in Figure 1. This explains why three-quarters of the employees surveyed by the Towers Perrin organization (Towers Perrin, 2008) in a large global study said, "their organizations or senior management don't do enough to help them fully engage and contribute to their company's success." And, it explains why when U.S. federal government project managers were asked about executive support for a study conducted by the Council of Excellence in Government (COE, 2008) 80% responded that they were not getting what they needed. In addition, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC, 2012) conducted their 2012 global survey on the state of project management, they found that "**lack of executive sponsorship** was the second largest factor that contributed to poor project performance." Jack Welch, former CEO of General

George, a project manager who is trying to apply some recently acquired knowledge, related how frustrated he was after learning about the best practice technique of writing a project charter. He spoke enthusiastically about how such a document could help him establish and maintain his authority, an aspect of his job with which he was consistently having trouble. Then, he lamented that he could never use such a document because the part of the organization he worked in had not, and surely would not, adopt such a technique.

Figure 1 – Problem

Electric, is reported to have gone so far as to have said, "If you can't get top management to support your program, don't even try."

For the purpose of conveying the concepts in this paper, I have adopted a **broad definition for the executive** as a person responsible for the administration of a business or department. This executive may be an individual or a function performed by more than one individual such as a board or committee. It could even be a Project Management Office. On an organization chart, the executive appears above other individuals and functions, including the project manager. The executive could be the project manager's boss, a sponsor, a senior stakeholder, a business or department head, or a vice president. Ultimately, the executive is someone with more authority and power than the project manager.

This compelling need for executive actions for project success is being driven by changes in the project environment. Gone, for the most part, is the one-dimensional definition of project success; it worked. Gone too is the triple constraint definition where project managers focused on time, cost, and quality. These days, the **definition of project success has expanded** to the point where customer acceptance, organizational and cultural impact, and strategic business objectives must be included. For NASA, former President Bush used this type of success gauge in 2004 when he declared that America chooses to explore space because doing so "improves our lives, and lifts our national spirit." The way I see it, lifting national spirit is a huge expansion in the definition of project success, one that I am certain cannot be achieved without getting executives to act for that project success.

Increases in **project complexity** are also changing the project environment. Projects are more interconnected, more interdependent, and more interrelated than ever before. So too are the businesses in which projects are being conducted; they now have complex alliances with strategic suppliers, networks of customers, and partnerships with allies and even with competitors. The result is that business systems are significantly more complex than in the past. Gone are the days where the typical project deliverable is a stand-alone product used by a single customer; instead, systems are being delivered for groups of stakeholders with diverging needs.

Additionally, there is a need for **more project managers**. According to a recent worldwide PMI job growth report (PMI, 2017) "there's a widening gap between employers' need for skilled project management workers and the availability of professionals to fill those roles." The talent gap is so large that \$208 billion in GDP losses are projected during the next decade because of insufficient project management talent. This will put tremendous pressure on the project managers who are in the workforce; the all-too-familiar

WHAT TO DO

- Organize And Manage Work As Projects
- Pick The Right Projects
- Maintain Close Stakeholder Relationships
- Use Suitable Project Management Process
- Ensure Projects Follow Documented Plan
- Ensure Projects Are Based On Requirements
- Ensure Resources Are Sufficient
- Engage Middle Management Help
- Use Job Performance Standards
- Make And Support Timely Decisions
- Ask The Right Questions

Figure 2 – Executive Actions

“do more with less” approach is sure to accelerate. Trying to do more with less will further drive up the need for executive actions if project success is going to be achieved.

EXECUTIVE ACTIONS

The good news associated with the topic of executive actions for project success is that a number of experienced project managers and authors have been articulate about the actions that they would like their executives to take. We can add to these publications the voices of many experienced project managers. These are individuals who have moved beyond success managing relatively low complexity and low-risk projects to struggling toward success managing more complex and higher risk projects. I have, as a consequence of writing and speaking extensively on this subject and consulting in this subject area, benefited from a significant number of direct interactions with project managers and with executives. Many, if not most, of these interactions were with people who were ready, willing, and able to respond thoughtfully and provide their recommended executive actions for project success. All of these sources have contributed to the development of **an executive actions list**; see Figure 2. Furthermore, every one of these actions that I have listed is backed up by extensive data from comprehensive industry studies and research. You can consider the executive actions on this list, and then make a list for yourself. You can build upon the solid basis for this list by blending your experience and your judgment, by reflecting upon the unique circumstances of your project and your organization, by soliciting from your fellow project managers, and by tempering the list with the reality of what can be achieved in your specific situation.

EXECUTIVE BARRIERS

Even the most progressive executives who are interested in supporting project managers by acting for project success often find that task easier said than done. The demands of their executive responsibilities, the constraints they encounter both real and imagined, and their limited understanding of the discipline of project management can hinder even the most enthusiastic among them. It is essential for project managers who want to get their executives to act for project success to **understand the barriers that their executives face**. Only after gaining this insight can a project manager understand how effectively to help his or her executive take the actions necessary for project success.

The executive's **viewpoint differs** from that of the project manager. Whereas project managers tend to view project management quite personally, often with little or no distinction between their performance and the performance of the project, executives tend to view project management as a means to an end, as a good way of motivating people toward achievement of specific objectives, as a source of future executives, and as a means to achieve strategic objectives. Furthermore, **project management knowledge differs**; although project management may be second nature for project managers, that is unlikely to be the case for executives. The impact of this knowledge gap between executives and project managers can be exacerbated by the common “hands off” style of some executives. For those executives, the pendulum to avoid micromanaging may have swung a bit too far in the other direction. The “I empower project managers to do anything they want as long as they meet milestones” type of approach may obfuscate important opportunities for the executive to take actions for project success.

Executives and organizations are at varying **levels of change readiness**. It does little good to push for a change if the executive or the organization is not ready; in fact, it is counterproductive and “sours the well water” for future attempts. High readiness levels are characterized by strong desires for change and readiness for it; a strong resistance to change characterizes low readiness levels. Moderate readiness levels are characterized by a desire for change but a lack of readiness. Additionally, the organization will itself impose limitations on what the executive can do. The organization’s **level of maturity** limits what it is capable of accomplishing even if the necessary time and resources are available. If the organization’s projects are characterized by last-minute heroics, ad hoc activity, and a lack of formal processes, then choosing only an item or two from the list of executive actions may be the best that can be done. By contrast, organizations with well-defined, repeatable processes that undergo continuous improvement have the latitude to undertake a greater number of items on the list.

People, after all, are at the center of the executive’s work life. Where there are people, there is politics. And, **organizational politics** can subvert even a well-intentioned executive’s action for project success in favor of the politically expedient. The field of project management, in particular, is fraught with politics, in large part because the ability to get things done is invariably shared among numerous entities. Since the vast majority of projects exist outside of the traditional organizational structure in a matrix configuration, executives and project managers are relegated to the role of supernumerary. Neither the executive nor the project manager has the sufficient levels of formal authority needed for project success. Add to this problem the cast of characters with roles as project stakeholders, and then competing agendas come into play.

PROJECT MANAGER STEPS

The goal is for executives to act for project success. Getting to that goal involves you, the project manager, **taking steps to help your executive overcome the barriers** to taking those actions. This involves challenging the status quo. And, challenging the status quo entails building upon and reinforcing a strong mutual partnership between project managers and executives. When successful, this partnership becomes a “let me help you to help me” type of situation where you take the steps to help the executive overcome the barriers, and he or she, in turn, then takes actions for project success; project manager steps are listed in Figure 3. These steps are all focused on helping lower the magnitude of the executive barriers and increasing the likelihood that your list of executive actions for project success will be listened to and acted upon.

Having the ability to **speak truth to power** is an important skill. When effectively practiced, your level of influence, relative to your lack of authority, will increase. That influence will further increase if

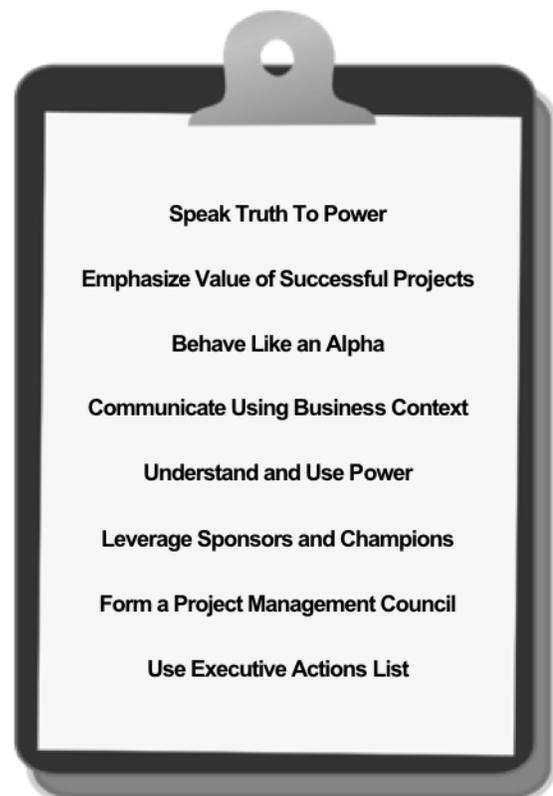


Figure 3 – PM Steps

you effectively communicate **the value of successful projects**; findings in a recent *PMI Pulse of the Profession* report (PMI, 2015) showed that organizations using proven project management practices wasted about 13 times less money than the low performers. Additionally, it is not just the organization that benefits; executives benefit too. Successful projects are critically important to the executive who understands that the number one reason for executive failure is not because of lack of vision or strategy. According to a cover story in *Fortune Magazine* (Charan, R, & Colvin, G., 1999) "It's bad execution. As simple as that: not getting things done, being indecisive, not delivering on commitments." Furthermore, "while average CEO tenure in the biggest companies has remained fairly steady at seven to eight years, those who don't deliver are getting pushed out quicker...poorly performing CEOs are three times more likely to get booted than they were a generation ago. Either they deliver, soon, or they're gone."

To ramp your influence levels up even further, you can **behave like an Alpha**. A survey of over 5,000 project managers, stakeholders, and executives has provided an extraordinary insight into what the top two percent of project managers, the Alphas, know and do that everyone else does not (Crowe, 2016). The Alphas believed strongly that they had enough authority, even though they had the same amount as others. They also spent twice as much time planning and were twice as effective with communication as the others. Furthermore, their communications were in the business context that resonated with executives.

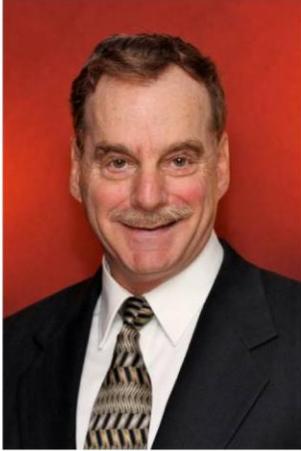
Finally, you can **understand and use power**. Power refers to the ability of the project manager to influence others to act for the benefit of their project; it is a resource that enables compliance or commitment from others. You have, as a project manager, an excellent opportunity to build your levels of expert power (your expertise is centered around what you know about your project), and your levels of referent power (the affiliations you have with other groups and individuals). Keys to building these two types of power are ethics and trust. In *The Leadership Challenge*, which continues to be a best seller after six editions and 20 years in print (Kouzes, B, & Posner, B., 2017) and which is considered the gold standard for research-based leadership, the text informs us that leadership requires trust: "It's clear that if people anywhere are to willingly follow someone, whether it be into battle or into the boardroom, the front office or the front lines, they first want to assure themselves that the person is worthy of their trust." One of the most effective ways to build trust is to abide by the four values in the PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct: responsibility, respect, honesty, and fairness (PMI, 2007). Transgressions in anyone of these four values can cause immediate and long lasting undercutting of trust. Leveraging **sponsors and champions** and forming a **project management council** will grow your power even further.

Now, you are ready to blend your experience and your judgment, reflect upon the unique circumstances of your project and your organization, solicit from your fellow project managers, and make your own tailored executive actions list. By using that list, combined with some willpower, you will be well on your way to **helping your executive overcome barriers so he or she can take actions for project success**.

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Michael O'Brochta has worked in project management for over thirty years at the CIA where he led the development of highly complex top secret projects, programs and systems, and where he led the development of their project management and systems engineering training and certification program to mature practices agency-wide. As founder of Zozer inc., he helped develop and implement the new government-wide Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers; through his consulting engagements, he is helping organizations raise their level of project management maturity. Mike recently served at the PMI corporate level as Chair of the Ethics Member Advisory Group. He is a sought after speaker, and he has been featured in issues of PMI Today, PM Network, ProjectManagement.com, CIO Magazine, Information Week, and Government Executive Magazine. Mike writes and speaks extensively about project management, and since his climb of another of the world's seven summits, he has been exploring the relationship between project management and mountain climbing.

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