

People Outweigh Methods and Tools

Interview with Reinhard Wagner ¹

Chairman of Executive Council
International Project Management Association
Honorary Chair, German Project Management Association



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Journalist's notes

For more than three decades he has been dancing with projects and walking in pace with management. Having participated in the development of project, programme and portfolio management standards, he always stands in the frontier of project management and follows the footsteps of change. His footprints spread across diverse sectors as Air Defense, Automotive Engineering, and Machinery, as well as various not-for-profit organizations. Who is he? Yes, he is Chairman of the IPMA Council and Past President of IPMA. Talking about project management, he has many “gold sentences”.

Introduction to Reinhard Wagner

Reinhard Wagner has been active for more than 30 years in the field of project- related leadership, in such diverse sectors as Air Defense, Automotive Engineering, and Machinery, as

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well as various not-for-profit organizations. As a Certified Projects Director (IPMA Level A), he has proven experience in managing projects, programmes and project portfolios in complex and dynamic contexts. He is also an IPMA Certified Programme and Portfolio Management Consultant, and as such supports senior executives in developing and improving their organizational competence in managing projects. For more than 15 years, he has been actively involved in the development of project, programme and portfolio management standards, for example as Convenor of the ISO 21500 “Guidance on Project Management” and the ISO 21503 “Guidance on Programme Management”. Reinhard Wagner is Past President of IPMA and Chairman of the Council, Honorary Chairman of GPM (the German Project Management Association), as well as Managing Director of Tiba Managementberatung GmbH.

Interview

Q1. As 2018 Chairman of the IPMA Council, would you please tell us what measures IPMA will take to promote the development of project management in China?

Reinhard Wagner: IPMA’s vision is “promoting competence throughout society to enable a world in which all projects succeed”, which we will continue to set into practice in China through our member association Project Management Research Council (PMRC). PMRC is networking in China through many associated regional PM Associations and Universities, providing education and training, offering certification, performing research and — what is most important to us — spreading the idea of good practices through our Young Crew (YC) to young professionals in China. **This year, PMRC will conduct a joint research project with IPMA, analyzing the degree to which China is project-oriented. In Germany for example, more than one third of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was created through projects.** Trends show further increases in Germany. What about China? We could assume that the project-orientation is the same, but we need facts and figures for comparison. Thus, IPMA helps to benchmark and develop the project management in its member associations.

Q2. As John Chapman writes, “Projects can be a battle at times. There are finite resources available, multiple projects running at the same time with varying priorities, and business as usual constraints...”, the life of project managers is hard. Do you agree with that? In your opinion, how can project managers deal with challenges?

Reinhard Wagner: I agree with the statement of John, but isn’t this exactly why we are doing projects? If a task were easy, just repetition and thus boring, we would not be satisfied, right? **A short survey revealed what project managers are looking for: a challenging task is the No. 1 reason for people to take responsibility of a project.** A project manager needs to be a certain type of personality, someone that is **striving for the extra mile**, looking for challenges and maybe also the adventure... It’s certainly nothing for people with an attitude of a 9 to 5 job. We need to carefully balance the challenges, not to overdo it with the project, but use **them to learn, to grow and make our way forward on our journey...**

Q3. Having worked in the field of project management for over three decades, what changes have you observed?

Reinhard Wagner: Main emphasis of project management in the beginning was planning single projects, network techniques and tools such as PERT, CPM or akin. Later, multiple projects, programmes portfolios and bundling projects in a certain way to achieve greater benefits came into focus, also pointing at the important role senior executives play for projects in an organization. How is **the strategy of an organization implemented through projects and programmes?** Do projects and programmes pay into the strategic ambitions of an organization? Do they add value to the organization and sustain that value over time? Many questions point to the strategic relevance of projects. **Project Management Offices (PMOs) became a hot topic in the community,** setting standards for project management, supporting all stakeholders during the execution of projects, monitoring and controlling the performance of all projects in scope as well as collecting and disseminating lessons learned throughout the organization.



The people engaged in projects were also seen as more important than methods and tools. What is their motivation to take part in a project? How can the collaboration between people improved? How to lead, develop teams, and establish good communication and collaboration across specific functions, organizational units, organizational borders and even cultures? Soft skills are needed. **IPMA highlights the “people competences” in its IPMA Individual Competence Baseline (IPMA ICB) Version 4.0** and thus recognizes a competence that is universally accepted and key for success.

Q4. Humans face pressing problems globally such as poverty and natural disasters. As far as you are concerned, how can project management serve to help deal with global problems?

Reinhard Wagner: Projects are about getting things done, moving things forward and making the change real. The above mentioned global problems are issues to be dealt with by politicians, public administration or NGOs. **All of them do not really have experience in managing projects.** There are many good practices available, which we can lever, available through our IPMA network. On the IPMA Blog I am always writing about success stories, for example about “IPMA Coaching 4 Development”, helping NGOs to be more successful or how the Mayor of Panama City set his political agenda into practice by establishing a PMO and professional project management standards. During the disaster, project management cannot be made available, the search and rescue forces as well as the military are the first ones to intervene. However, when rebuilding infrastructure, organizing to feed people and bringing them back home is something project managers can support.

A clear “yes we can” to your question, however, we need to be flexible and adapt to the specific circumstances of these challenges.

Q5. You've written an article titled "Dancing with your project — anticipating next steps based on weak signals". Is it about change management? Would you please elaborate on the topic of change management?

Reinhard Wagner: The article was focusing on "anticipation", **forward-looking**, as opposed to looking in the rear mirror, because you cannot drive a car by just looking backwards. **You may analyze various weak signals, checking whether a risk may occur and cause damages to your project. Unfortunately, we have lost the capabilities of looking forward, and we are basically told to "just follow" the procedures and rules derived from past projects or told by very experienced project managers.** It may work, but in our dynamic and complex world, this doesn't work anymore. We need different skills. And yes, this is related to change management. Because we need to anticipate what effects a project may have on the various stakeholders. Do they support the project? Do they oppose and how do I recognize them when they are in opposition?

Q6. As many experts have said, we are entering an era of ABC (AI, Big data, Cloud computing) characterized by VUCA. So in the new era, in which direction will project management go? Nowadays what are the frontiers of project management?

Reinhard Wagner: There are no frontiers. We are on a journey. The profession is exploring the possibilities, and there are plenty of them. Big Data and AI will support projects with data analytics and automated planning and reporting tools. My question is, whether the human brain is able to understand and interpret what the outcome of Big Data and AI is and take the right decisions. I have my doubts. We need to make use of our networks, collaborate more, bring together all the capabilities we have, make use of them and develop something that is mutually beneficial. There is also a limitation: egoism. We cannot achieve results on our own, or exploit others to become successful. We need to learn how to cooperate, to work together, on all levels, from the private through business to the public life. Project management needs to focus on cooperation, more than ever, highlighting the value it creates for all stakeholders and balancing the "what's in for me" across all people involved. It may sound naïve, but the more people we have on this planet, the more we need to find mechanisms of co-existence and co-operation. We need to find a way back to collaboration; otherwise we will suffer from regression, injustice and violence. Let's make a difference and lead by example.

Q7. How will digitalization influence project management? What competences do project managers need to cope with changes brought by digitalization?

Reinhard Wagner: It's quite obvious that digitalization has great influence on our projects. Which competences do we need in order to cope with these changes? Firstly, and certainly most important we need to develop competences dealing with digitalization, **utilizing digital tools and applications, understanding the potentials as well as the threats.** A project manager may use social media to search for competent team members or contractors for a virtual project. Another competence is **data analytics.** We have an increasingly big amount of data available ("big data"), which we can make available for decision making. Analyzing data of our customers, for example their preferences, questions, sales or complaints, allows us to take

more information into account while developing new products and services. A project manager needs to utilize available data, analyse it statistically with available skills, methods and tools, for a better understanding of stakeholder interests. It may support also the forecast or anticipation of trends and future developments.

The more information are available, the faster the change of customer requirements, the shorter the lead times of product or service development and the more interaction between all stakeholders involved. **Agile project management, change management competence and short learning cycles are necessary for project managers. Critical reflections of the work performed, self-organisation and a participatory leadership style are needed.** Project managers as well as all employees need to switch roles and responsibilities from one instance to the other. **Reflection, feedback and dynamic learning processes are key.** Thus, the competence for collaboration and stakeholder engagement will become a core competence for every project manager. The project manager does not solely focus on the project, but increasingly on the context, relevant stakeholders and how these stakeholders can be involved. The management competence will be less important, increasingly we need to influence the project through interventions, shaping the context in a favorable way, making stakeholders engage and support the project.

Q8. You have made an analogy between PM and archer, which I think is so vivid. Would you please explain your viewpoints in detail?

Reinhard Wagner: **The archer is a metaphor for a project manager, who wants to reach a goal (“target”) with the means given (“bow and arrow”) in a specific context. You need to focus your mind, your energy and your soul towards the goal. It means to set yourself totally into the scene and getting “united” with bow and arrow.** The bow is like an extension of your body and the arrow is like your energy targeting the spot of your goal. And as Paolo Coelho wrote: “Do your best to hit it [the target], and always regard it with respect and dignity; you need to know what it means and how much effort, training and intuition was required on your part.” **In essence, it means we are not successful when we just “manage” projects. We need to embrace all aspects of our project, get united with it and thus make it real.** We need to ask ourselves the following questions: What is our relationship with the project? Why are we doing it? What are the means, capabilities or ideas available for performing the project? How are we approaching the target? How can we continuously improve the way we are doing it? What does it mean for us to get “united with the project”? There are other labels for what I am talking about, for example the IPMA ICB describes a competence called “resourcefulness”, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is famous for the psychological “flow” concept: “The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times... The best moments usually occur if a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.”

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