

Project Management Is about Reducing Uncertainties

Interview with Thomas Walenta, PMI Fellow ¹

Member of Board of Directors
Project Management Institute



Interviewed by Yu Yanjuan
Journalist, Project Management Review: PMR (China)

Journalist's Introduction

Several months ago, I read an interesting article titled “Projects & Programs Are Two Different ‘Animals’ ”, in which project managers are compared to lions while program managers are compared to elephants. Deeply impressed by the vivid description, I decided to probe more about the author behind the article: Thomas Walenta.

Thomas Walenta, PMI Fellow, member of PMI Board of Directors, former President of PMI Frankfurt Chapter (1998 to 2005), global advisor for *PM World Journal*, former Program Manager for IBM, is a leading expert in delivering value to business through project and program management. According to his friends and workmates, he is helpful, devoted, competent, open, passionate, professional and motivating.

In the interview, Thomas Walenta shares with us his perspectives, experiences and observations about project management profession. He explained why he took up project management profession in spite of being a maths major; he released the secrets of high-performance PMO; he emphasized the importance of lessons learned; he put people at the

¹ This interview was first published in PMR, Project Management Review magazine earlier this year. It is republished here with the permission of PMR. The PM World Journal maintains a cooperative relationship with PMR, periodically republishing works from each other's publications. To see the original interview with Chinese introduction, visit PMR at <http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>

core of management... There are some golden sentences that have enlightened me and will surely inspire the global readers.

Interview

Part 1: Lessons Learned

Q1: In 1988, you decided to abandon your technical skills to take up the career of project management. Why?

Thomas Walenta (Walenta): At that time, being 34 years old, I just had finished my first significant project successfully. When thinking about what had been learned from that, I recognized that the most important factor for success was how you deal with the people involved:

- a good and frequent exchange with the customer PM, trying to understand his constraints and problems and trying to help him,
- an irregular but positive relationship with the customer sponsor
- my regular and clear communication events (a monthly all-hands meeting, weekly status meetings, reports), which instilled discipline and awareness
- collaboration with subcontractors, honoring contractual commitments while integrating work results by all participants efficiently

I liked the positive feedback and I thought by myself, what would be easier: maintaining a technology acumen, or building on people skills continuously acquired and tried. For me, the answer was clear: working with people will be always required while technology is changing quickly and also has a wide range of options nobody can capture. And, maybe most importantly, I focused on my new priority and cut off any ties to technology. It was a decision with consequences that I never regretted.

Q2: As a program manager yourself, what leadership style do you adopt and how do you assess your own leadership style?

Walenta: In general I adopt a servant leadership style with my team based on ethical values and beliefs. I use the PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct as a base for that. In certain situations (crises, conflicts) I use a more authoritative style, but where does the authority come from? It comes from being accepted as the leader by previous ethical behavior instilling trust. Sometimes the team even demands more guidance from me, e.g. being guided more closely in problem solving or keeping timelines and agendas, and I try not to offer this to them, since it would mean to manage, not to lead, and take the challenge away to improve themselves.

As a program manager specifically, in a business stakeholder environment, I am more blunt, direct and persistent, trying to establish a powerful position and finding allies. This may include pre-meeting conversations. But I avoid common behaviors like being dishonest or bullying others also in these circumstances. Having worked a lot with Japanese, I understand and focus on relationship building and reaching consensus and establishing a reputation.

In any international environment it is key to be aware of the cultural specifics and prepare accordingly.

Q3: You've noted that "lessons learned" is the right thing to do in PM. Would you please explain it?

Walenta: We as humans learn the most from failures and stories. Lessons learned provide exactly these from a practical view. Yes, we can learn from textbooks and understand theoretical concepts, but our brain builds pattern recognition from practical examples which relate to our experience, senses and feelings. So as a project manager, you either make painful experiences yourself (and you will have some) or you reflect on your and others' experiences.

Good practices include, a project diary to remind yourself and to practice discipline, and a risk register, in which you may record opportunities coming from finding solutions to problems in your projects. They are opportunities to exploit in future projects by yourself or others.

Excellent leaders strive to develop others, by examples, stories or coaching (asking questions). It is easier for them if they write down their lessons learned and their insights, maybe publish a book and increase their influence. Excellent leaders build a reputation by speaking and writing about their stories and lessons learned. Regularly creating lessons learned is a sign of maturity of a profession and an individual.

As a project manager, one of your career goals should be to get better in leadership skills, embracing lessons learned is one component of it.

Q4: You've worked as project manager in IBM. What are the lessons learned about project management in that organization?

Walenta: IBM created one of the first enterprise-wide PMOs in the mid 90', called PM center of excellence (PMCoE). It still exists. PMCoE established a PM career path and profession, a global curriculum and global PM methods. IBM measures the impact of the PMCoE and quality programs on business results. Their PM knowledge base (including lessons learned) is exceptional and accessible globally. So I think I was lucky to be able to serve IBM and its customers by delivering projects and programs and being able to do it in this exceptionally supportive environment.

At one point, IBM management send me to review a troubled SAP rollout program though I never was involved in SAP's technology and processes before. Together with two other PMs, we quickly established a recommendation and I was asked by the client to run the turnaround and after its success, to continue running the SAP rollout for another 5 years. I am grateful to IBM management and the customer to understand that project management and technology are two different things and a good project manager needs to be first and at most a good project manager (or program manager in this example). It is even better to bring in technology skills separately and not to rely on one person for success. But you have to be able to learn quickly and listen to the experts.



Part 2: Viewpoints and Tips

Q5: Is it necessary to build a PMO in every organization? What are the secrets of high-performance PMO?

Walenta: There are PMOs that change an organization's culture towards project management and then are disbanded and there are PMOs that take over operational functions and adapt to the needs of the organization.

As to first category, it is helpful to build a competence center for any change an organization wants to implement. If an organization does not think that project management is a key competence for them, there is no reason for a PMO (but with the digital disruption all organization will have to consider how to manage change). Often the creation of a PMO is following a crisis: a major failed project burning profits, staff churn because there is a lack in work priorities creating overload and staff confusion, customer dissatisfaction because of missed deadlines, unmet expectations or low quality. The PMO is sponsored by top management and improves the situation, e.g. by establishing standards and reporting, portfolio management and stakeholder management. If top management sees that the crisis has been managed, they naturally lose interest in this kind of PMO and that's why most PMOs have a lifetime of only 2-4 years.

If a PMO understands to continue to support top management in a beneficial way and hence obtains ongoing support from them, if the PMO adapts to new requirements, then it may survive and become an operational part of the business, increase its influence on the organization's goals and success. The PMO then could be part of the top management board (at par with finance or sales), run the continued portfolio management process, be aware of and

may be accountable for the use of resources/staff, measure quality compliance and improvement and maintain stakeholder engagement. With these five operational features, a PMO is almost indispensable.

Q6: As people are instinctively resistant to change. How can we implement change into organizations?

Walenta: Change has to be initiated and permanently driven from the top to be successful. A change manager should be established and running a change program with different projects.

In a change, you must be prepared to lose some staff, but you should strive to sustain key competencies for your future business. Ethical approaches have been quite successful, being honest and transparent about the change reasons and goals (so frequent and repeat communication via different media is important), fair to all staff (e.g. offering anybody a new job role), responsible in helping individuals to overcome personal constraints (e.g. by providing training, counseling, transfer support) to change and respectful if some chose not to change.

Good change managers will use ethical influencing techniques to instill an optimistic positive mood and reduce uncertainty and fears, like David Rock's SCARF model or Joseph Grenny's 6 sources of influence.

Q7: According to your experience, how are project managers able to gain the support from executives(upward management)?

Walenta: Exercise leadership skills and understand the environment executives live in.

Executives live in a different culture as project managers: they mostly compete for resources, priorities and promotions. It is often a competitive, win-lose, no teaming, no trust environment. Executives lead by power. A CEO may be the loneliest person in the organization.

On the other side, PMs are asked to lead a team often without direct positional authority. So they need to establish empathy and emotional intelligence, trust, a servant leadership style, a win-win attitude, team building and conflict resolution techniques. PMs mostly cannot lead by power; they have to use other influencing methods. And they often go into meetings with executives with that mood and culture. Result: a culture clash.

What needs to be done is to look at executives in the way that you look at all other stakeholders: who are they? What are their interests? What do they want to hear to maintain their self-esteem and to be able to fight their peers? Exert your influencing capabilities to them.

And if you are not getting along: replace your sponsor with somebody who has an interest and power to support you. It is your responsibility to make the project successful; it includes selecting your allies well, even if it is the sponsor. Is that hard? Yes, and this is why stakeholder management skills are important, though often neglected in favor of technical skills.

Q8: The idea “people>work>product>benefit>value” was proposed by you. Would you like to elaborate on that?

Walenta: Going from the right to left, we can ask what is needed to achieve it.

Value is something we want, and we perceive it as good, success, something positive that mostly is seen as sustainable. What is needed to create value? We need to create a capability, a benefit, an outcome, which enables the value delivery. That benefit was not there before the change and after it has been established it is at best able to continuously create the expected value. The benefit is answering the question WHY are we doing something, which should be related to an expected sustained value delivery.

The product is enabling the benefits by answering the question WHAT is needed to provide the benefit. For example, by building a bridge over a river, we create a product. The why, the reason for the bridge, is to be able to cross the river. If we attach roads (other benefits) to that bridge, it starts to provide sustainable value (e.g. to commuters by saving time to work).

HOW to create the bridge, they all require work (and material). Project management is concerned with the work to create the product. Today, still people do the bulk of work, although with the help of machines. In some (distant?) future, the work might be done more and more by machines and AI, until no work will be required to be by humans.

The chain is also showing a difference between project and program management:

Project management is managing the work to produce a product by people. Which product to build is decided by program managers. Which people to use depends on the work required and is decided by project managers.

Program management is creating benefits by using and integrating products (from projects) to deliver value to stakeholders. Which benefits to create is decided by strategy and subsequently portfolio management.

Q9: It’s interesting that you said project and program managers are different animals. Why?

Walenta: Project managers have a tough job to implement results that have been pre-determined. You want to build a bridge, a software, run an event next Sunday? Define WHAT you want and ask a project manager to employ the techniques from the *PMBok Guide*, and he will suggest HOW to do it. Even agile techniques are employed for a WHAT (product), if you don’t know about all the features in detail upfront.

Program managers do not have to care about how to build the bridge across a river, software to sell food or run the event. They are concerned about the WHY we are doing this and what kind of results we need to create values. A bridge does not provide value if other projects don’t build roads on both sides of the river. Program managers can use the Program Management Standards to focus on benefits management, strategy alignment, governance, integration and

stakeholder management.

The WHY is closely related to the purpose and strategy of the organization, which a project manager normally does not need to consider.

Research e.g. by Pellegrinelli has found that good project and good program managers have quite different attitudes and capabilities. So they are different species.

Part 3: PM and Culture

Q10: As I know, you have made keynote speeches globally. Based on your experience, what role does culture play in project management?

Walenta: According to his book “a world of three cultures”, Basanez defines three “hyper cultures”: the culture of achievement, culture of honor and culture of joy. Project management, as a set of processes to achieve targets, is clearly coming from the culture of achievement, which is also promoting competition as a positive value (80% of survey participants in China think of competition as a positive, compared to 71% in US and only 56% in Japan).

Project management is now present in any culture, and it includes a Code of Ethics, PMI’s code promotes the four values of fairness, respect, responsibility and honesty. As an example, bribing is not acceptable in this context, as it is deemed being unfair, but it is still acceptable or even business practice in many countries, especially if they are related to the cultures of honor or of joy.

Q11: You said China’s project management will have a bright future. What makes you arrive at that conclusion?

Walenta: China has a huge pool of talents and resources. It has grown quickly over the past decades and matured in many aspects, overall more than western countries. Quick changes need project management in all of its flavors. And project management needs professionals who are able to use, improve and extend these flavors. I think China is capable of this.

With all that success, growth and improvement in China in the past 20-30 years, the prevailing attitude seems to be rather to accept and deal with uncertainty, not to be fearful and have a closed mindset, to just do it and learn from failures. This is the attitude that helps project management and society to improve. Project management at the core is about reducing uncertainties for stakeholders.

And lastly, following Basanez, the culture of China is widely a culture of achievement, and hence project management very much suits the Chinese as a means to create success.

(Note: This article contains the personal views of Thomas Walenta, and does not represent a statement by PMI or the PMI Board of Directors.)

To learn more about PMR magazine, visit <http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>



About the Interviewer



Yu Yanjuan

Beijing, China



Yu Yanjuan, Bachelor's Degree, graduated from the English Department of Beijing International Studies University (BISU) in China. She is now an English-language journalist and editor working for Project Management Review Magazine and website. In the past, she has worked as a journalist and editor for China Manned Space Agency website and *Student English Times*. She once worked part-time as English teacher in training centers. For work contact, she can be reached via email yuyanjuan2005@163.com or LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/yanjuan-yu-76b280151/>.