

Diversity Can Be an Asset

Interview with Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez ^{1,2}

Past Chairman, Project Management Institute
Visiting Professor, Duke University, USA



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Introduction to subject of interview

Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez (www.antonionietorodriguez.com) is a visiting Professor of Duke University's Corporate Education and IE Business School, and past Chairman of the Project Management Institute (PMI). He is the author of "[The Focused Organization](#)" (Taylor & Francis) and currently working on his next book, "[The Project Revolution](#)" (LID), that will be published early 2019.

Antonio is the creator of concepts such as the Hierarchy of Purpose, featured by Harvard Business Review, or the Project Manifesto; which argue that projects are the lingua franca of the business and personal worlds from the C-suite to managing your career or relationships.

His research and global impact in modern management been recognized by Thinkers50 with the prestigious award "Ideas into Practice". Antonio is also a much-in-demand speaker at events worldwide. Over the past 15 years, he has presented at more than 160 conferences

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/>

² How to cite this interview: PMR (2018). Diversity can be an Asset. Interview with Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez; *Project Management Review*; republished in the *PM World Journal*, Vol. VII, Issue XI – November.

around the world.

Born in Madrid, Spain, and educated in Germany, Mexico, Italy and the United States, Antonio is an Economist with an MBA from London Business School and Insead's International Director Program. He is fluent in five languages.

Interview

Project Management Has Strategic values

Q1. Why did you choose project management as your career? Is it a coincidence or a deliberate choice? What are the setbacks and highlights in your career?

Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez (Nieto-Rodriguez): My first job in a project was a mere coincidence. Just after joining PricewaterhouseCoopers in 1997, I was asked to join an SAP implementation project at a large energy corporation. My role was in the project support office, basically ensuring that project team members would send their timesheets at the end of the week so that the project leader could have good estimates about the budget consumption. It was probably not the nicest job, but a great learning experience. After several projects, I decided to focus my career on project management. I launched the first global research on project management (PwC Boosting Business Performance through Project Management) and became PwC's Global Lead Practitioner in Project and Change Management. Despite the focus, I had several setbacks in my career, including being fired, mostly because senior leaders, didn't see and understand the value of project management. For the big executives it was a tactical discipline, not strategic.

Despite the setbacks, I was determined to convince executives of the strategic value of project management and make a career in this amazing field.

Looking backward at my achievements, I can say that so far I have managed to accomplish my two ambitious goals. I am especially proud of the recognition by Thinkers50 as one of the most influential management thinkers in the world, and the first project management expert ever to obtain this recognition. Also, having been the global Chairman of the Project Management Institute in 2016 was a great highlight in my career. I could see the passion of thousands of project management volunteers around the world. And I also had the pleasure to deliver a keynote in the HR congress in Shenzhen. I was truly impressed by the importance that China gives to project management.

Leadership is an Evolving Discipline

Q2. In the era of artificial intelligence and digital transformation, which type of leadership style will be highly recommended?

Nieto-Rodriguez: Leadership is an evolving discipline.

In the past, leaders were seen more like managers, and their role was to ensure that the objectives of the organization were met through monitoring and controlling the employees – also known as chain of command. A good example is Carlos Goshan, from Renault-Nissan. Mr. Goshan is known for his aggressive style, for his focus on cost containment and his fearless firing of thousands of employees. Employees are just a means to an end for him. What counts is making the numbers and keeping showing growth to the shareholders. On the other hand, Mr. Goshan has a great ability to embrace cultural differences. His personal background encourages and supports such an approach. He accepts cultural differences and even includes them in the organizational culture.

Later on, leaders became inspirational persons, great communicators with a vision. Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft, is an example of visionary leaders. Before Satya Nadella, Microsoft was led by Steve Ballmer, who had a similar leadership style as Carlos Goshan. Employees engagement levels were at the lowest. Satya Nadella's mission was to reform Microsoft's culture after years of in-fighting and stagnation. He brought a different leadership style. He shared a vision for Microsoft centered on the client and employees. He gave a meaning to the organization, which had a positive impact on employees, who felt inspired to give their best in their jobs. Nadella claimed that the job of a leader isn't to dwell on constraints, because there are always constraints. Instead, leaders are the "champions of overcoming constraints", keeping the team's eyes on the prize.

In the current digitalized world, leaders have a strong focus on encouraging entrepreneurship and "out of the box" thinking. They are more like coaches, or godfathers, that support initiatives providing the means. They are able to connect with all employees through the purpose of their business. Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba is a great example of today's leadership style and a figure that embodies the persona of a responsive and responsible leader. His passion to help people and the society is reflected in Alibaba's policies: they offer stock options to employees and are concerned about improving the lives of employees who grow with the company.

Project Management Helps Poverty Eradication

Q3. You've said, "If one day poverty and famine were eradicated from the earth, it will be through a project." In your opinion, what role will project management play in coping with global problems such as pollution and poverty?

Nieto-Rodriguez: I am convinced that project management can play a vital role in solving global, social and sustainable development issues. For that to happen, it is critical that project managers elevate themselves to become true leaders. Leadership, as opposed to management, happens when we start talking about the benefits of the project and the impact it will have on the region. A leader engages the sponsor and persuades key stakeholders to support the project. A project leader inspires the team to work together to make something big.

More and more governments and institutions, like the World Bank, have changed their primary focus into education. They claim that the key for developing countries is education. The goal is to provide and teach the skills, tools and mindset to the local population so that they can create their own businesses and launch their own projects to improve their living conditions.

Tips for Project Managers

Q4. As an expert on project management, what tips would you offer to those who are eager to make the transition from technical professionals to project managers? What are the top qualities of a competitive project leader?

Nieto-Rodriguez: I believe that the majority of project managers can find a job in other industries, which is one of the advantages of our expertise: our skills can be applied in most environments. I myself worked as a consultant for ten years, seeing different sectors, and then I moved into banking where I worked seven years and now work since 2014 in the pharmaceutical industry. There are three things I always recommend for those that want to grow as project managers.

- 1) Move out of your comfort zone; assume projects outside your area of expertise. And why not consider taking a job outside project management for some years, for example, business line manager with P&L responsibilities?
- 2) Keep learning and developing. An MBA is an excellent complement to a project manager PMP as they learn about many aspects of the business leadership.
- 3) Understand your strengths and accept your weaknesses; work towards becoming a better leader every day.

Diversity Can Be an Asset

Q5. In the wave of globalization, a project team usually consists of members from different cultures. In the multi-cultural context, how can we build high-performing teams?

Nieto-Rodriguez: Indeed, due to globalization, more and more project teams are composed of diverse members. They come from different countries, cultures, gender, expertise,... It has been proven that diversity can become an asset if it is incorporated and embraced by the project. The most successful projects have always a high-performing team, which is often high in diversity. A great example of multi-cultural project is the development of the first iPhone, between 2004 – 2007, probably one of the most successful projects – commercially - in recent history. The iPhone team had a very diverse team, located in the US but with members also in Europe and in Asia.

Here are four tips on how to benefit from diversity in your team:

- 1) Listening to Everyone: allow team members to share what they think about a project or an idea. There are some cultures where speaking up is seen unsuitable unless asked for it. So, make sure that you go around the table, asking members about their views and how they would address the point at hand.

- 2) Ideas Win: Hierarchy, experience, years in the company, ranks, culture, personality... should not impose themselves on the discussions and decisions. The best ideas should win. And you, as the leader, should ensure that this happens.
- 3) Converge towards One Common Solution: after listening to everyone and discussing different options, the final decision, the best idea, should be agreed upon and supported by everyone. It is important that every team member feels part of the final decision and the agreed solution.
- 4) Establish Shared Ways of Working: don't impose your standard ways of working onto your project. Develop them according to the different cultures represented in the team. This is applicable to the day-to-day activities within the project, such as punctuality, communication style, working hours, etc.

How to Lead Successful PMOs

Q6. You are working as Director of the Program Management Office. According to your observation, what are the qualities that distinguish an outstanding program manager from ordinary ones.

Nieto-Rodriguez: Program Management Offices have always been questioned, and many of them are closed just after a few years of being established. This is due to the fact that most of their work, or at least the perception that the organization was getting from, was mostly administrative and increasing the bureaucratic burden. This questioning and skepticism continues today, even stronger, as organizations are struggling to stay in business and are desperate to cut costs wherever possible.

The most successful PMOs are led by project management experts that understand the business, that can challenge the executives about their decisions, that can foster innovation and that create an agile culture. The superior program managers are those that can show the value, the benefits and the impact of their projects, and the faster, the better. They run their projects as businesses, with a strong focus on profitability and long-term sustainability. The best program managers often move to run part of the business. One of the best role models I have come across is Alan Mulally, the former program manager that constructed the Boeing 777. He was so successful a great team leader with a business mindset that he was appointed as CEO of Boeing. And later on, he became the CEO of Ford Motors.

About the Interviewer



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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/yanjian-yu-76b280151/>.

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