

Soft Skills Should Be in the Center of PM

Interview with Ralf Müller ^{1,2}

Editor-in-Chief, *Project Management Journal*
Professor of Project Management
BI Norwegian Business School



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Introduction

Ralf Müller, DBA, MBA, PMP, is now Editor-in-Chief of *Project Management Journal* and Professor of Project Management in BI Norwegian Business School.

Dr Ralf Müller is also former Associate Dean at BI Norwegian Business School, Adjunct Professor at University of Technology Sydney, Haitian (distinguished) scholar at Dalian University of Technology, Honorary Professor at Tasly Pharmaceutical's Project Management College, and Director Research Lab, European School of Governance, Germany.

Apart from teaching roles, he is also Chairman of the Academic Advisory Board of AIPMO (Association of International Project Management Officers), Switzerland; member of the Senate at ISM University, Vilnius, Lithuania; and member of the board at the Institute for Project Management at the University of Iceland.

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He lectures and researches in leadership, governance, and organizational project management. These are also the subjects of his more than 230 academic publications, including 13 books. His accolades include the 2016 PMI Fellow of the Institute Award, the 2015 PMI Research Achievement Award (a life-time achievement award), the 2012 IPMA Research Award, and the 2009 Project Management Journal Best Paper of the Year Award.

Before joining academia, he spent 30 years in the industry consulting with large enterprises and governments in more than 50 different countries for better project management and governance. He also held related line management positions, such as the Worldwide Director of Project Management at NCR Corporation.

Interview

Project Management Is an Accidental Choice

Q1: Why did you choose project management as your career? Do you enjoy this profession?

Ralf Müller (Müller): Well, I guess my “choice” is typical for many in the “accidental profession”. I was working as a UNIX specialist in the department for major clients in a large worldwide IT company. One day our department manager returned from a meeting at Corporate Headquarters and said, “All people in this department are project managers from now on.” We were hesitant to accept this in the beginning, but then decided to give it a try. Having led several projects of increasing value, I took over international and global projects. Later, during my time as worldwide Director of project management in this company, I travelled around the world to rescue troubled projects. I learned that my efforts could only help one project or project manager at a time, so I decided to change to academia to spread my word to many people simultaneously. I have never regretted being a project manager or switching to academia. Both are exciting and challenging roles.

Q2: As a professor, editor-in-chief, editorial board member for a number of academic journals, contributor to some PMI standards, book author, researcher, etc., you have a busy schedule. Would you please share your secrets of time management?

Müller: I do not know if there is some secret in what I do. As an academic, my schedule is first and foremost determined by the dates when I have to teach at the University. The gaps between these dates I fill with research projects, conferences, PhD supervision etc. When it comes to priorities, I try to balance the achievement of short-term deadlines with work on activities with long-term deadlines. Prioritization typically follows the old 2x2 matrix of urgent (high or low) versus important (high or low), where I prioritize high/high items but from both short-term and long-term perspectives.

Q3: You’ve been awarded PMI Research Achievement Award and IPMA Research Award.

What do the awards mean to you?

Müller: Obviously it shows that my studies are seen as relevant and that the results are recognized as credible. It also tells me that my research topics are not only of academic interest, as the awards are primarily given by practitioner organizations. Besides the awards for specific studies, I especially value the lifetime research award. It gives a feeling that most of what I do is valued, not only one particular study.

China Needs to Focus More on OPM

Q4: Project management is thriving in China. As a visiting professor at Fudan University and Dalian University of Technology in China, do you think so?

Müller: Certainly. When I taught in the BI-Fudan Executive MBA program in Shanghai, I saw more and more students with a professional certification or a good education in project management. When I did research in China, together with the teams from Dalian University of Technology or others, I saw the same effect. People now talk more proficiently about their projects and their management. Still I think the sheer magnitude and number of projects that are going on in China requires many more people with a solid education or professional certification in project management. While the understanding of project management is thriving in China, I think there is a need to expand the view to organizational project management. As I said, people are getting better in understanding projects and their management, but I do not see growth in the understanding of how projects are embedded in the organization and how to adjust the organization for efficient project delivery. While some of the students I see know what portfolio management is, other very important aspects of good organization-wide project management are often unknown, including themes like benefits realization management, portfolio optimization, governance of projects, governmentality and organization-wide PMOs.

Performant Teams Shift Leadership Authority

Q5: You've initiated a survey on leadership in projects to understand the interaction between the leadership by the project manager and the possible leadership by team members in projects. What does the survey result show?

Müller: The study, of which this survey was one of many ways to collect data, gave a number of new insights and proved some of the existing leadership theories as inappropriate for project settings. Existing theories, such as the Tuckman model of form, storm, norm and perform, or the Hersey & Blanchard Theory that leadership styles need to be adjusted to team members' experience in working together, do assume that teams become performant after a period of time working together, and if a new team member joins, the whole team has to go through the entire development cycle again in order to become performant again. If this was true, most of the project teams would never become performant. Team members frequently change in projects.

We showed that these teams are performant anyway. They do it by shifting leadership authority to the best leader at any point in time in the project. Sometimes leadership emerges from within

the team (which is known as shared and distributed leadership), or the leadership comes from the project manager (which is known as vertical leadership), or in other cases the project manager appoints a leader from within the team and let him/her lead the project temporarily under the project manager's supervision (which is known as horizontal leadership). The balancing of these three leadership approaches over the duration of the project is named "balanced leadership". In other words, depending on the situation of the project, the project manager decides to either let the team lead itself, or appoint a leader from the team, or lead himself/herself. Through that the best possible leader is in charge at any time and in any situation in the project. This contributes to the best possible performance at any time in the project.

Q6: In the era of globalization and digitalization, which leadership styles would you recommend? Balanced leadership?

Müller: Leadership is situation dependent. Balanced leadership is an observed reality in projects. Globalization and digitalization add to the need for cultural understanding and sensitivity in virtual interaction, so project managers and teams need to become more sensitive to the differences in cultural value systems to better understand each other in terms of behaviors and thinking patterns. That includes the ability to question whether their own value system is the best in a given situation. As we are all ethnocentric and inclined to prefer our own cultural value system over that of others, globalization can only work if we go back a step to overview the situation and then decide which values are most appropriate in a given situation or project predominantly based on facts and not on emotions.

Trust Is Characteristic of Successful Projects

Q7: You've written papers on *Ethics and Governance in Temporary Organizations*, so in your opinion, what should we pay special attention to in leading temporary organizations?

Müller: The studies on ethics in projects showed that 97% of all projects suffer from at least one of the top three ethical issues: transparency issues, relationship issues, or optimization issues. It also showed that transparency issues (i.e. the project manager not reporting the real status of the project) are dominant in control-based governance settings. However, successful projects are typically in trust-based governance settings. So steering committees (as project governance institutions) should give more trust to their project managers. Projects that are launched with a steering committee that trusts the project manager are typically quite successful. Projects launched with a steering committee that predominantly controls the project manager are heading towards a vicious downward circle of hiding mistakes and performance issues, which lead to more control, which leads to even lesser transparency etc. These projects can never get to a level of trust that is characteristic of successful projects.

Organizations with a PMO Perform Better

Q8: What are the principles of building efficient and high-performance PMOs?

Müller: Flexibility. PMOs are responsible for improving organization-specific issues. Every

organization is different and so are their issues to be solved. Moreover, after PMOs have solved an issue, their mandate changes to solving another issue. This new mandate might require different skills and different people in the PMO. So PMOs change constantly. Our studies show that PMOs are quite successful in solving the issues they are tasked with and then take on very different issues after that. This requires different skills and different people over time. This change in people is often misunderstood as a reaction to poor performance of the PMO. This is wrong (but seen quite often), and leads to false conclusions, such that most PMOs will be closed after two or three years. They will not be closed, but their mandate changes. And this is not because of poor performance, but because they performed so well that the issue they were supposed to solve is now solved. On average, PMOs are good in what they are doing. This is not only shown by academic studies but also in studies by the big consulting firms. Organizations with a PMO have significantly less projects with cost or time overruns.

Q9: It has been suggested that project managers should have longer-term perspectives rather than focus only on time, scope, schedule or quality. Do you agree?

Müller: Yes, certainly. There are so many examples, from Sydney Opera House to Ford Taurus, which show that the short-term thinking is not linked to long-term success. My suggestion is to share the responsibility for the business success of a project's product or service between the project sponsor and the project manager, so that both are interested in making the project's product or service a success.

Awareness for Soft Skills Needs to Grow

Q10: In recent years, soft skills have been emphasized. How do you feel about the importance of soft skills in projects?

Müller: They are more important than hard skills, but do not substitute them. To give you an example, in 1988 Pinto and Slevin published a study with 10 success factors, which were predominantly hard factors. Together they explained 69% of project success, about 7% per factor. About ten years ago Rodney Turner and I looked into the project managers' leadership style as a success factor. We found that this single factor impacts project success between 9% and 43%. So much more than the single hard factor. Recently we had similar results at the governance level. Governmentality (the human side of governance) has much stronger impact on project results than project governance itself.

Q11: Project management has evolved constantly. What are your suggestions for the future development of project management?

Müller: I have two suggestions:

Firstly, related to the question above, the awareness for soft skills and the importance of social intelligence for good project results needs to grow. Projects are made successful by people, not by tools or techniques. People need structure, so we need methodologies etc., but in the end, it is the people who go the last mile, or the extra mile, to make the project succeed. Hence soft

skills should be more in the center of project management training and delivery.

Secondly, the old distinction between projects, programs and portfolios implies that only those parts of the organization are important for project selection and delivery. This is outdated. In today's organizations, many (sometimes all) parts of the organization are aligned with efficient project delivery. Hence we need to change the perspective to Organizational Project Management (OPM), that is, the integration of all project-related activities in an organization. If we broaden the view from the three perspectives named above to all organizational units that contribute to projects, we will better understand how projects as temporary organizations are embedded in the wider permanent organization. This improved understanding will provide us with a lot of new places to gauge and fine-tune the organization for better and sustainable project (and thereby organizational) results.

To see the original PMR interview with Chinese introduction or to learn more about PMR magazine, visit <http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>



About the Interviewer



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