

With Projects We Create the Future

Interview with Prof Martina Huemann^{1,2}

Editor-in-Chief, IJPM
Professor, Head of Project Management Group
Vienna University of Business and Economics



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Introduction to the interviewee

Martina Huemann is Editor-in-chief of the *International Journal of Project Management*, Professor, Head of Project Management Group and Academic Director of the Professional MBA Project Management, WU - Vienna University of Business and Economics (WU Vienna), board member of Project Management Austria, Human Resource & Project Management Expert / Coach / Consultant, Founder and Manager of enable2change, a network of experts that enable others to put strategy into action and manage projects professionally.

Interview

About China

Q1: What's your impression of China? How do you view project management in China?

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Martina Huemann: I like China very much. The culture is so different to Europe. People are nice and welcoming. As this is my second trip to China, I know only a little bit about China. I have engaged with IPMA (China) and met some founders of PM in China. My impression is that China has American-style project management, which makes me wonder why you don't have more Chinese-style project management. Project managers should borrow a lot from Chinese culture, in which people think in a flow and that everything is always changing. That fits nicely to a future-oriented and change-oriented Project Management approach.

About PM Career

Q2: Would you please share with us your story with project management? Why did you step into this career? Do you enjoy what you are doing?

Martina Huemann: I studied business administration at WU-Vienna University of Business and Economics and worked in development projects in Eastern Europe. When I was up to finish my studies a new professor at my university planned to establish the discipline of Project Management and he was looking for people. I was hired based on my project experience and started without knowing what exactly "project management" was. I learned during the process. I was interested in project management and also pursuing an academic career. Having gone through a lot of steps, I'm now a professor myself researching and teaching project management and human resource management in project-oriented organizations. Nowadays I seldom work as a project manager myself. I apply it on my research projects, but mostly take the role of a project owner nowadays. I'm coaching, consulting and training people to enable them to become and professionalize as project managers.

Project management has been the subject of my whole life. I enjoy very much what I'm doing now. I think it was a perfect choice for me. I like complexity in my own life and have many different roles. I need a certain amount of complexity in my life; otherwise I will get bored. Sometimes I put more effort into this, and sometimes into others. And I have to balance work and family, but it works quite well for me. I think to do what you love is always the best way to have a full life.

About HR Management

Q3: In VUCA era, how should we deal with challenges in human resource management?

Martina Huemann: In project-oriented companies, there are a lot of projects. Human Resource Management departments very often don't understand what it means when a project starts and ends. They need to transfer people from one project to another. What is often overlooked is that human resource management is taking place on projects. Just think about the annual appraisal, for instance. There is a structural issue. The project manager needs to be included somehow in the performance appraisal of his or her team members. While the line manager takes care of the long-term development of the person, the project manager is mainly interested in the short-term performance and development.

About Diversity

Q4: What's your opinion about diversity in project teams?

Martina Huemann: In projects, you will always have diversity. That's part of the deal. Diversity is there and the question is how to deal with it and support it so that diversity can lead to innovation and creativity.

However, we should not only look at the differences but also work on the commonalities. The other tip is to construct a shared "Project Picture" in order to make people work together. Communication and trust are important. We need to build up trust at the beginning of a project and keep it growing over the duration of a project.

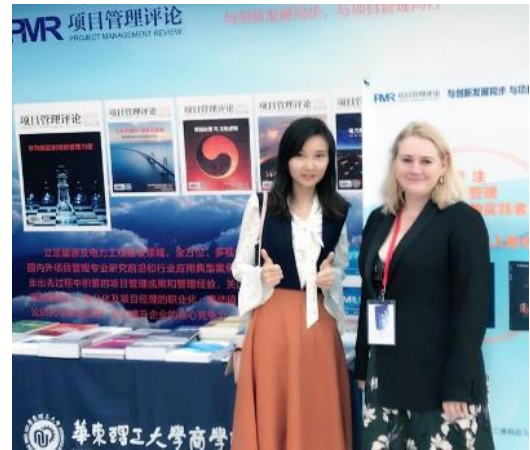


Photo: Interviewer Spring of PMR and Professor Huemann

About Complexity

Q5: In your presentation, you cited an example that one project team reduced complexity too much and the project failed in the end. Why?

Martina Huemann: They were not able to connect with stakeholders any more. They built something, but the end users wouldn't use it, so they failed. We need to reduce complexity but remain comprehensive enough. For instance, you build an IT system. Reducing complexity too much would be to only concentrate on the IT solution. Viewing it more comprehensively means you see that it's not only an IT project, but we also need to train people, change processes and behaviors and especially get the end users to accept the new IT system. Being more comprehensive and holistic on the project will ensure that the outcomes have better quality and the chances for project success are higher.

So how can we avoid reducing complexity too much? My answer is that project managers need both building up and reducing complexity in their leadership role at the same time. At the beginning of a project, we need to build up complexity. We need to invite the stakeholders and understand what they want. And meanwhile we need to be clear about what we can deliver and what we will not be able to cover in this project. That's reducing complexity. Reducing complexity is right; otherwise we wouldn't be able to act but the question is to what extent and in what way.

About Uncertainty in Projects

Q6: In PM Congress in Shanghai, you made a keynote presentation titled "Without Uncertainty, No Opportunity". Would you please share your views with our readers?

Martina Huemann: Uncertainty is inherent in projects. Compared with machines, living organism

is unpredictable, depending on the context, and impossible to be influenced directly. Therefore, I recommend systematic leadership. That means making everybody taking on responsibility, leading with indirect influence at a meta-level instead of direct influence at an operational level, and leading with limited information under uncertainty. We need new methods and a new mindset to deal with uncertainty.

About Soft Skills and Leadership

Q7: The importance of soft skills is increasingly mentioned. What's your comment on this topic?

Martina Huemann: For me, soft skills are the basis of everything and the foundation for good leadership. Project managers need to be social-competent and self-confident to lead. For instance, you need to be able to manage yourself and to manage others, manage your own emotions and emotions of others. Adequate values and attitude are also essential for good leadership.

Some experts talk about the distinction between managing things and leading people. I think management and leadership are quite connected. We provide structures and use certain methods to introduce certain patterns to the project to lead teams. For me, people are important and so are structures. You need to provide orientation for people when they are working on a project. I don't believe that leadership is only about soft skills and that management is only about structures.

About Women in PM

Q8: Have you paid close attention to females in project management? What's your observation? What are your tips for female professionals in this field?

Martina Huemann: When I started in project management in 1996, there were 20 people in the PM education program I attended. Of these 20 people, there were 19 men and me. However, over time that has changed in two respects. Firstly, in my MBA program classroom today, the ratio of men and women is fifty to fifty. Secondly, the diversity of project background has changed. When I studied, it was more or less about engineering or oil and gas projects and some IT projects. Today, projects are about everything: strategy, organization, personal development, etc. That means there are also more women in these application fields.

Women that I know in project management are very strong and they are clear about what they want. They need to have entrepreneurial attitude and to be strong in their presence. It will be hard if they are quiet. They don't need to be loud but they should be able to be loud if necessary. And if you want to become a project manager, just go for it. Just be brave and trust yourself. Many women don't trust themselves enough and always question themselves too much.

About the Future of Project Management

Q9: You've said that project management is evolving. So in what direction is it evolving?

Martina Huemann: I believe project management will become more holistic. It will incorporate more sustainability methods. The project types will be more widespread. With projects we create the future.

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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/yujuan-yu-76b280151/>.