

The Centrality of People in Modern Project Management: Issues, Competences, and Feelings from PM Community ¹

Massimo Pirozzi and Marco Sampietro

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the centrality of people in modern project management, on the consequent importance of their relationships, on the relevant competences that are needed, and on corresponding feelings that project management community has. The evolution of these concepts, their acknowledgment and their applications in current international standards, including relevant reference texts and policies in terms of certification examinations, definitively highlight the crucial role that people-related issues have in order to reach projects' efficacy, efficiency, and, ultimately, success. The results of a specific research that has been realized by SDA Bocconi (Sampietro et al, 2019) are a key part of this paper, and, on one side, do confirm the major importance that relationships have in the perception of project management community, while, on the other side, do show in detail the feelings – in some cases the concerns too – of PM professionals about the relevant competences that are needed.

PEOPLE-RELATED ISSUES IN MODERN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Projects are made by people to be delivered to other people; this statement confirms very clearly people's centrality in all projects, since stakeholders are both the doers and the beneficiaries of each project, and, then, they have a primary role of actors, and not just a subordinate role of participants. In general, stakeholders influence the projects through their behaviors, i.e. their relationships, and their impacts are evidently different whether they act as doers, or as beneficiaries, of project results; however, in both cases, their impact is higher the greater complexity of the project becomes.

In the domain of complex projects (Pirozzi, 2019), projects are large, and/or highly innovative, and/or means to achieve the customers' business goals, and/or projects' results are service-oriented and/or intangible (e.g. in software projects), and/or stakeholder requirements are not well-defined and/or are evolutionary, and/or not all stakeholders cooperate effectively; all these projects are essentially value-driven, rather than plan-driven as traditional complicated projects are, and relationships with stakeholders are primary, since the stakeholder satisfaction is their critical success factor.

Therefore, which relational competences are needed? In the stakeholder perspective (Pirozzi, 2019) of doers, a relational issue that is of extraordinary importance is teamwork, since it is not only the major factor for creating value, but it is also the major factor of destruction and removal of endogenous complexity, so generating a huge regaining

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and/or increase of productivity in the project; main relevant groups of competences as leadership, teaming, conflict management, negotiation are then necessary. On the other side, in the stakeholder perspective of beneficiaries, the group of competences that are of major importance are those relevant to both stakeholder relations, and communication, management, since they are the most appropriate to target and monitor stakeholder satisfaction, which is the critical success factor in projects of all size and complexity.

REFERENCES GROUPS OF COMPETENCES	PMP® Examination Content Outline (2020)	IPMA ICB 4.0 (2015)	APM UK PMBOK (2019)	STANDARDS & ACADEMIC JOURNALS (2019, source SDA Bocconi)
LEADERSHIP	lead a team	leadership	leadership, diversity and inclusion	leadership, manage diversity
TEAMING	build a team, support team performance, empower team members, ensure training, build shared understanding, engage and support virtual teams, define team ground rules	teamwork	teams, virtual teams, team development, time management, continuing professional development	team building, team management, collaborate with people, delegate, motivate people
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT	manage conflict	conflict and crisis management	conflict resolution	conflict management
NEGOTIATION	negotiate project agreements	negotiation	negotiation	negotiation
COMMUNICATION	manage communications	personal communication	communication	communicate properly, listening to people, oral communication, written communication, public speaking
STAKEHOLDERS	empower stakeholders, ensure training, collaborate with stakeholders, mentor relevant stakeholders, engage stakeholders, emotional intelligence	assessing, and engaging with, stakeholders, relationships and engagement	stakeholders, social context, engagement of stakeholders, influence stakeholders, facilitation	stakeholder management, develop relationship networks, develop relationships based on trust, sociability, social intelligence

Table 1. Last PM References and Groups of Relational Competences

Do International Standards and Best Practices recognize the essential role of relational issues in modern project management? Nowadays, fortunately, the answer is positive – in some cases, after a complex journey that took decades, although there is for sure still a long path to follow in the direction of reaching better results in achieving project goals by satisfying properly stakeholder expectations (Pirozzi, 2019). In Table 1, there is a synthetic map between some of last references in Project Management and groups of relational competences.

In PMI's world, the PMBOK Guide Fifth Edition (Project Management Institute, 2013) was the first edition that included project stakeholder management - with its own set of processes, as a new knowledge area, and, nowadays, brand new Project Management Professional (PMP)® Examination Content Outline for July 2020 Exam Update (Project Management Institute, 2019) includes, absolutely innovatively, the domain "people" as one of its major references, since it will cover a 42% percentage of items on test. In the just released PMI Standard 7h-Exposure Draft (Project Management Institute, 2020), which "applies to any project or delivery approach — such as predictive, agile, and hybrid — across industries", people factor is essential not only in both project management and in project delivery "People drive project delivery", but also in the future of organizations "The people element of projects enables organizations to experience success with the inherent changes wrought by projects". Moreover, almost all of the twelve brand-new "principles" that are supposed to "provide guidance for effective project management" address personal/cognitive and/or interpersonal/relational competences.

In IPMA's world, current ICB 4.0 (International Project Management Association, 2015) includes "people" as one of the three main competence areas, and "stakeholder" as an element of "practice" competence area. In addition, current APM Body of Knowledge seventh edition has "people and behaviours" chapter as a principal part.

Finally, SDA Bocconi made a comprehensive analysis of several standards and academic journals, then identifying, normalizing, and categorizing both relational and cognitive competences; relevant results are hereinafter shown.

THE SDA BOCCONI'S RESEARCH: THE RELATIONAL AND COGNITIVE COMPETENCES OF PROJECT MANAGERS

Research objectives

There were three main research objectives:

- identifying the competencies that project managers should possess
- identifying the most important competencies
- identifying how much project managers possess the identified competencies

Research design

There were different options to design the research.

For the first research objective, competencies could be drawn by the existing literature or may be asked directly to people. While the second option is more powerful in term of managerial implications, it is also more complex for mainly two reasons:

- The first is selecting the right people to ask for their opinions. In fact, when it comes to defining the competencies that project managers should have, different people can provide useful insights. Among them, we can list Project Managers, Team Members, Sponsors, Customers, HR Managers, and Recruiters. While comparing the opinions of people with different roles is very interesting, from a statistic perspective that means having large samples for every role, asking for an effort that the research team could not afford.
- The second is standardization. In fact, every person may use different words to indicate the same competencies. Reconcile different expressions to standard competencies is possible but also very time consuming.

For the above-mentioned reasons, we decided to collect competencies from resources that already dealt with the topic of the competencies of the project managers. As a result, we considered two types of resources: Project Management standards/ guidelines and Academic Journals. Among the available resources, we made a selection based on different criteria depending on the type of resource:

- For Standard and Guidelines, the criteria had been international reach, local (Italian) relevance, and diffusion.
- For Academic Journals quality (Impact Factor) and focus on Project Management had been the criteria.

In Table 2 is reported the list of standards and guidelines considered for the research, while on Table 3 there is the list of Academic Journals.

Standards and Guidelines

ORGANIZATION	STANDARD/GUIDELINE
PMI	<i>PMBOK® Guide</i> , Sixth Edition PMCDF (Project Manager Competency Development Framework), Second Edition
IPMA	ICB4
AXELOS	PRINCE2
ISIPM (Italian Institute of Project Management)	Guida alle conoscenze di gestione progetti Guida ai temi ed ai processi di project management
ISO-UNI	21500

UNI (Italian Organization for Standardization)	11648 (Italian norm for the competencies of non-regulated professions: Project Manager)
UNI	11506 (Italian norm for the competencies of non-regulated professions: ICT Professionals)
Agile Business Consortium	The DSDM Agile Project Framework (2014 Onwards)

Table 2. List of standards and guidelines considered for the research

Academic Journals

Built Environment Project and Asset Management	International Journal of Project Management
Elsevier Ltd (peer-review under responsibility of AHFE Conference)	Journal of Industrial Engineering and Management
Elsevier Ltd (peer-review under responsibility of SciKA – Association for Promotion and Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge)	Journal of Management in Engineering
Elsevier Ltd (selection and peer-review under responsibility of the IPMA)	Journal of Project, Program & Portfolio Management
Engineering Project Organization Journal	Journal of Small Business Management
Engineering Project Organization Journal	Procedia Engineering
European Journal of Business and Management	Procedia Social and Behavioral Science
Harvard Business School Publishing	Project Management Journal
Human resource Management International Digest	Team Performance Management
International Journal of Information Technology Project Management	

Table 3. List of academic journals considered for the research

As far as the second research objective is concerned, the issues were slightly different. In fact, to rate how much competencies are possessed, the best way should be to test them. Unfortunately, this is not feasible in practice since it requires to develop a new assessment tool, which is too time consuming, and to submit it to project managers, who

probably are not going to reply, because of the time a professional assessment tool requires to be used. Another option could be to ask to people that work with project managers how much project managers they work with are competent. This approach is feasible but, unfortunately, the risk is to obtain pretty similar answers. In fact, every respondent should rate different people, thus leading to average answers. As a result, we opted for asking directly to project managers how much a specific competency is relevant and how much is possessed by them. This approach has some limitations as well, and the most relevant ones are the ability to provide reliable self-ratings and the desirability bias.

The list of competencies

One of the main output of the research is the creation of a list, which includes 51 competencies derived from project management standards, guidelines, and academic literature. Actually, the initial list was much longer so that we decided to group competencies that were very similar: grouping had also a practical advantage, since nobody would probably have answered to a survey composed by more than one hundred items. The competencies in the list had been categorized into three groups: Technical, Relationship (Soft Skills), Cognitive. The categorization sometime is, of course, debatable, since competencies with no clear boundaries are also present; for example, listening to people has evident effects in term of relationships, but it can also be considered a cognitive competence. In the literature review, we also found some competencies related to the “management of the self”, such as stress management, resilience, integrity but again, mainly for practical reasons (data collection) we decided to exclude those competencies from the research.

Among the 51 competencies, 31 of them are relevant to relationship (Table 4) and cognitive (Table 5) competencies.

Collaborate with people	Listening to people	Sociability
Communicate inside and outside the team with the proper communication channels	Manage diversity (e.g. cultural, gender, age etc.)	Social intelligence
Conflict management	Motivate people	Stakeholder management
Delegate	Negotiation	Team building
Develop relationship networks	Oral communication	Team management
Develop relationships based on trust	Public speaking	Written communication
Leadership		

Table 4. List of relationship competencies.

Analytical thinking	Focus on what really matters	Intuition
Critical thinking	Generalist approach	Problem solving
Decision making	Identify new opportunities	Self continuous learning and improvement
Find creative solutions	Innovative	System view

Table 5. List of cognitive competencies

Ultimately, we just verified that both above relational and cognitive competencies are totally coherent with, and almost all are directly addressed by, PMI Standard 7th-Exposure Draft.

The survey results

More than 1300 Project Managers had been contacted on LinkedIn; among them, 370, which can be considered a good percentage, filled the survey.

In the survey, project managers have been asked to rate the above listed competencies along two dimensions:

- Importance, that is, how much project managers believe that a specific competence is relevant for project success. Scale 1 to 7, where 1 corresponds to Not important at all, and 7 to Critical, has been used;
- Coverage, that is, how much project managers believed they have every competence. Scale 1 to 7, where 1 corresponds to Competence not possessed and 7 to Competence fully possessed, has been used.

In this paper, scale has been converted in 1 to 10 for the purpose of a more friendly divulgation. In Table 6 the 31 relationship and cognitive competences are shown together with the mean score of Importance, Coverage and the related Standard Deviations.

Competencies	Importance mean score	Importance Std. Dev	Coverage mean score	Coverage Std. Dev
Analytical thinking	7.79	1.44	7.91	1.41
Collaborate with people	8.52	1.27	8.98	1.34
Communicate inside and outside the team with the proper communication channels	8.28	1.4	7.86	1.42
Conflict management	8.28	1.36	7.93	1.64
Critical thinking	7.99	1.48	7.33	1.66
Decision making	8.26	1.34	7.94	1.47

Delegate	7.6	1.56	7.34	1.66
Develop relationship networks	8.14	1.31	6.51	1.71
Develop relationships based on trust	8.27	1.43	7.64	1.66
Find creative solutions	7.96	1.5	7.96	1.53
Focus on what really matters	7.99	1,37	7.99	1.54
Generalist approach	6.87	1.69	7,37	1.63
Identify new opportunities	7.83	1.46	7.74	1.56
Innovative	7.9	1.51	7.99	1.57
Intuition	7.94	1.47	8.04	1.39
Leadership skills	8.34	1.34	8.61	1.63
Listening to people	7.91	1.41	7.03	1.6
Manage diversity (e.g. cultural, gender, age etc.)	7.79	1.46	6.74	1.61
Motivate people	8.34	1.4	8.2	1.5
Negotiation	7.81	1.47	7.89	1.54
Oral communication	8.0	1,39	6.86	1.61
Problem solving	8.47	1.33	8.31	1.4
Public speaking	7.86	1.44	6.97	1.69
Self-continuous learning and improvement	7.99	1.61	7.97	1.47
Sociability	7.42	1.51	7.06	1.7
Social intelligence	7,9	1.3	6.97	1.61
Stakeholder management	7.67	1.3	7.24	1.65
System view	7.74	1.49	7.74	1.5
Team building	8.3	1.37	7.63	1.64
Team management	8.56	1.34	7.7	1.67
Written communication	7,69	1.43	6.94	1.53

Table 6. Competencies of Project Managers and ratings on Importance and Coverage

Red and green colors had been used in two different ways:

- for Importance mean score, Importance std. Dev and Coverage std. Dev: Red color corresponds to the five highest scores, green color to the five lowest scores.

- for Coverage mean score: red color has been used for the five lowest scores, since a low score indicates a potential problem, green color for the five highest scores.

By looking at the Importance mean score column, we can notice that the difference between high score and low score competencies is pretty small, since the peak is at 25% and, apart just one item, i.e. Generalist approach, they are above a 7 score, indicating that the listed competencies are considered very important to run successful projects. This result has some practical implications since it emerges that, in order to be effective project managers, a wide range of competencies has to be developed. That means that training and coaching programs should be broad in scope.

It is interesting to notice the relatively low score of Delegate competence, which could be explained by the incidence, in the sample that has been used, of project managers operating in small teams, in which delegating is often considered a minor issue.

Another interesting result is the lowest score reached by Generalist Approach. In fact, while the literature stresses project management as cross-functional and cross-industry discipline, practitioners seem to have a different opinion. However, it has to be noted that Generalist Approach also reports the highest standard deviation, meaning that respondents had different perspectives. In particular, Generalist approach received all the possible answers (1 to 7) meaning that for some project managers it is considered useless while for others is fundamental. By matching this result with the results of another research carried out by one of the authors and the research of Brill, Bishop, and Walker (2006), it seems that Project Managers still believe in the relevance of functional and technical competences.

It is a bit unexpected to notice that Stakeholder Management, even though it received a score higher than 7.5, is part of the five competencies with the lowest scores, and, in addition, its standard deviation is small, indicating a better alignment of respondents if compared to other competencies. Although managing stakeholders is critical to project success, and, moreover, stakeholders determine the notion of project success, above perception could be explained considering that there are not so many years that project stakeholder management gained its primary role, and, then, relevant awareness is not yet fully acquired by project managers.

On the other side, the top five competencies in term of importance were more or less expected, since they include “classic” items such as Team management, Leadership, Motivation.

Then, looking at Coverage, we can first notice that the difference between the lowest score and the highest score competence is much bigger compared to the one relevant to Importance; in fact, it reaches 37%, with some competencies that score above 8.5. In general, we can say that the research brings some good news; in fact, among the five top competencies in term of importance, four of them also gain the highest score in term of Coverage, and that means that project managers believe they can deal effectively with the most critical competencies.

It is also interesting to report the relatively low coverage of Develop Relationship Networks that, together with the comment we made on the relatively low importance of Stakeholder Management and the highest score on Team Management, depicts a situation where Project Managers seem to be very much focused on dynamics internal to the project team, while they are less sensitive in managing the relationships with other subjects. However, similarly to the comment we made on Generalist Approach, Develop Relationship Networks reported the highest standard deviation, meaning that project managers have a different focus on the same subject.

A peculiar and not so good news is the low score of communication-related competencies. In fact, among the five competencies with the lowest score, three of them pertain to communication (oral communication, written communication, and public speaking). This cannot be considered good news since the PMI reports that 75% to 90% of the time of project managers is spent on communication. Consequently, not being proficient in communication can be detrimental to project performance.

By putting together the evidence of the research, it seems that project managers feel pretty confident in managing their teams and they are mainly focused on this task. However, if we consider the issues that are relevant to broader networks, project managers seem to be not fully aware of their relevance, and not ready to manage them effectively. Therefore, communication and stakeholder awareness seem to be the highest priority in terms of the support (training, coaching etc.) to be provided to project managers.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Nowadays, definitively, it is a fact that International Standards and Best Practices all recognized the basic role of relational issues in modern project management, and that the community of project managers confirms, with its feelings, the essential importance of relational skills. However, it seems evident that further important steps are needed, both on increasing focus in managing relationships with stakeholders that are not part of the team, and on developing those core competences in communication and stakeholder management that are crucial to target project's success.

“Relationship Management is of special importance in today's world”
(R.D. Archibald, 2017)

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About the Authors



Massimo Pirozzi

Rome, Italy



Massimo Pirozzi, MSc cum laude, Electronic Engineering, University of Rome “La Sapienza”, Principal Consultant, Project Manager, and Educator. He is a Member and the Secretary of the Executive Board, a Member of the Scientific Committee, and an Accredited Master Teacher, of the Istituto Italiano di Project Management (Italian Institute of Project Management), and he is a Senior Examiner for Certifications in Project Management, and for Professional Project Managers, too. He is Certified as a Professional Project Manager, as an Information Security Management Systems Lead Auditor, and as an International Mediator. He is a Researcher, a Lecturer, and an Author about Stakeholder Management, Relationship Management, and Complex Projects Management; in particular, he is the Author of the Book “*The Stakeholder Perspective: Relationship Management to enhance Project value and Success*”, CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group, October 2019. He has a wide experience in managing large and complex projects in national and international contexts, and in managing relations with public and private organizations, including multinational companies, small and medium-sized enterprises, research institutes, and non-profit organizations. He worked successfully in several sectors, including Defense, Security, Health, Education, Cultural Heritage, Transport, Gaming, and Services to Citizens. He was also, for many years, a Top Manager in ICT Industry, and an Adjunct Professor in Organizational Psychology. He is registered as an Expert both of the European Commission, and of Italian Public Administrations.

Massimo Pirozzi serves as an International Correspondent in Italy for the *PM World Journal*. He received the *2018 PM World Journal Editor’s Choice Award* for his featured paper “*The Stakeholder Management Perspective to Increase the Success Rate of Complex Projects*”.

E-mail: max.pirozzi@gmail.com



Marco Sampietro

Milan, Italy



Since 2000 Marco Sampietro has been Project Management Professor at SDA Bocconi School of Management, Bocconi University, Milan, Italy. SDA Bocconi School of Management is ranked among the top Business Schools in the world (Financial Times Rankings).

He is Associate Professor of Practice at SDA Bocconi School of Management and Director of the EMBA China. He is Faculty Member at the SDA Bocconi Asia Center, the Indian subsidiary of SDA Bocconi School of Management.

Since 2001, he has been Adjunct Professor at Bocconi University where he teaches Project Management and Project and Team Management. He is also Adjunct Professor at the Milano Fashion Institute and he had been Visiting Professor at the University of Queensland, at the International Hellenic University and at the Anton de Kom University.

He had been member of the Steering Committee of IPMA-Italy.

He is co-author and/or editor of 12 books on project management.

Finally, he is author of internationally published articles and award winning case studies. Dr. Sampietro can be contacted at marco.sampietro@sdabocconi.it