

Cognitive Readiness for Project and Program Management Teams During Times of Crisis¹

Rebecca Winston

Crisis comes in many different forms. Crisis for this opinion piece is a period that is unstable, uncertain, or crucial time in which change is impending or occurring. The world has faced many such times, whether one thinks of the Black Death beginning in 1347 or our current crisis regarding the coronavirus. Crises can be big encompassing the global population or smaller encompassing an organization. In either case, the myriad of external factors coming to bear upon a project or program need to be considered in the formation and maintenance of high-performing project or program management team.

For a foundation, the definition of cognitive readiness for this opinion piece is, “ . . . mental preparation, including skills, knowledge, abilities, motivations, and personal dispositions, needed to establish and sustain outstanding individual and team performance in the complex and rapidly changing environment of project, program, and portfolio management.” (*Cognitive Readiness in Project Teams*, ed. Carl Belack, Daniele Di Filippo, and Ivano Di Filippo, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2019, p.17) This definition encapsulates the various intelligences that people possess to different degrees: cognitive intelligence or intelligence quotient, emotional intelligence, and social intelligence. While these areas can be and have been sub-divided by various researchers and authors, for the purposes of this article, the categories will suffice. It is also acknowledged that one must have the requisite cognitive skills for the project or program management position to be filled. For example, if one is to be in the position of a safety expert on the project or program management team, one should have the requisite skills to determine the safety risks, safety needs, and applications of safety knowledge to the given situations that arise.

One should acknowledge that in many cases the project or program manager does not have the ability to do direct hiring or assignments of human resources, but in many cases those individuals have the ability to influence the hiring decisions or assignment decisions being made within the organization. So what should one be seeking in times of crisis that adds complexity, even to the some projects that would be less complex under conditions

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that do not present crisis? The answer is that it depends. So the focus will be the current crisis with some statements being of a more universal application.

Our current situation has a multitude of crises with one driving crisis of the corona virus. It is forcing project and program management teams to work virtually in most cases or with the protection of masks and distancing in other cases. Human interaction is changed.

What this means to project and program management teams is that the ability to communicate information and the state of being a cohesive team is of utmost importance. Thus, the intelligences of emotional and social intelligence are important and should be judged within the bounds of national and local regulations.

To aid in understanding what is meant by emotional intelligence, the operative definition to be used is, “ . . . the ability to manage one’s own moods, impulses, and emotions in a way that facilitates rather than interferes with the task to be performed.” (Cognitive Readiness in Project Teams, p. 150)

Also, to aid in understanding what is meant by social intelligence, the operative definition to be used is, “ . . . [the] understanding [of] others and managing relationships with other people.” in other words, a level of social awareness that allows one to see and potential understand other individuals point of view and to develop the necessary relationships on the project or program management teams, as well as with stakeholders. . ” (Cognitive Readiness in Project Teams, p. 151)

Applying these definitions, decisions regarding candidates for positions during times of crisis should be than more than seeking someone with the appropriate degrees and work experience, albeit that is equally important, but also showing the necessary cognitive skills. One needs to analyze what will be required of the individual in the position, especially what will be necessary for team interactions and interactions with stakeholders. So what does this mean from the start of a project or program? It means that one must determine what will be necessary for the team composition. How one will be able to achieve the necessary blend of intelligences and cognitive skills will be an initial primary concern of the project or program manager, as well as of the directing and hiring senior or executive management individual or team.

One technique is to map the intelligences one feels will be necessary. Mapping will allow one to determine what is needed for each position and to adjust those needs, as the hiring or assignment process proceeds. In other words, one can attempt to supplement intelligences and abilities that one finds are in a state of deficit in one individual with those intelligence and abilities in another hire or assigned individual. This approach is

especially applicable to larger projects or programs, as one can have more than one individual serving, as for example a safety expert. One could have the lead safety expert, who shows an inability to convey empathy or understanding in some situations. However, on the safety team one could have an individual, who has those requisite social intelligences to assist in interactions with other team members or impacted or concerned stakeholders.

With the corona virus crisis, as stated, many teams are working virtually. It means that one is using various media to communicate. One could have been assigned a lead safety expert that possesses the necessary credentials, cognitive intelligence, and cognitive skills for the position, but who does not communicate information in a manner that the stakeholders would be receptive. For instance, the individual might appear to be abrupt and not open to questioning or discussion on the points or actions being presented during an internet meeting with voice and visual presentations. The individual might be seen shaking their head in a negative manner or scowling when a stakeholder seeks to question something being presented. The message received by the stakeholder could be anything ranging from the expert is not open to a question to the question being asked is not an intelligent one. The stakeholder could develop negative feelings to the expert or the project and program. These feelings could even be projected upon the project or program manager. However, if one supplements the expert with someone with the requisite skills to appear to open and appear to empathize with the need for more or clarified information, the stakeholder should feel an inclusion and that they are being held in esteem by the members of the project or program management team.

It is not that the cognitive intelligence of the lead expert is not needed or valued. In fact, it means that the project or program manager would need the intelligences of emotional and social intelligence to be able to manage this situation from a position of understanding what is needed and the ability to recognize the supplemental abilities in others to supplement those needs. Further, the project or program manager must possess the social intelligence or awareness of the lead experts need to maintain positional authority over the domain for which they have the cognitive intelligence, experience and abilities or cognitive skills to lead the area on the team.

Several things could interfere with this action and one must be aware of them including the biases one could bring to the situation, as well as the biases that the other individuals could possess. Various mitigation strategies exist that could be applied. (.” (Cognitive Readiness in Project Teams, p. 78 - 85) The discussion of these approaches are beyond this opinion piece, but the identification and mitigation actions are necessary and should

be applied, as each individual possesses biases that might be brought forth during the various activities of a project or program.

One more example of the importance of having the appropriate intelligences on a project or program team is the need for clear, concise, and stakeholder applicable written communications. Even during the best of circumstances for a project or program, written communications can be difficult or misunderstood. Emails, texted statements, or memos can be misunderstood, appear to be criticizing in a negative manner, or to be personal attacks, or other effects of a written communication. However, when written communications are not supplemented by direct personal actions, the impact could be difficult or catastrophic for the project or program. Even attempts to follow-up or clarify with online communications of video, audio, or both communication paths may not be enough to undo the effects of the written communication. This situation is made worse by the various deficits or inabilities of personnel to communicate emotional and social intelligence via those media interactions. Having a communication specialist or manager on the project or program management team could enhance the ability of such written communication pieces to be effective or less negative in their reception. The communication expert could also be used to assist team members in the self-awareness process to understand what is needed for the situation and the stakeholder to whom the communication directed.

These examples are simple illustrations the need to have individuals serving on the team that have the requisite cognitive readiness or that can be supplemented by those individuals who have the requisite skills, abilities, or set of intelligences.

As project and program managers, one should seek to be more aware and prepared to approach the issues during times of crisis that exist within the subject areas of human resources and communications. Nothing in this area of management is obvious and could require multiple attempts to lead and manage in these areas; however, awareness is the first step and each of us need to educate ourselves and be more self-aware in these areas to provide the leadership and management to achieve a successful delivery of the objectives and deliverables or products of the projects and programs.

About the Author



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Rebecca (Becky) Winston, Esq., JD, PMI Fellow, is a former Chair of the board of the Project Management Institute (PMI®). An experienced expert on the subject of project management (PM) in the fields of research & development (R&D), energy, environmental restoration and national security, she is well known throughout the United States and globally as a leader in the PM professional world. Becky has over 30 years of experience in program and project management, primarily on programs funded by the US government. She is a graduate of the University of Nebraska's College of Law, Juris Doctorate (1980), in Lincoln, Nebraska and has a Bachelor's of Science (BS) degree in Education from Nebraska Wesleyan University. She is a licensed attorney in the states of Iowa and Nebraska.

Active in PMI since 1993, Rebecca Winston helped pioneer PMI's Specific Interest Groups (SIGs) in the nineties, including the Project Earth and Government SIGs, and was a founder and first co-chair of the Women in Project Management SIG. She served two terms on the PMI board of directors as director at large, Secretary Treasurer, Vice Chair (for two years), and Chair (2002). She was elected a PMI Fellow in 2005. She has served as a reviewer of the Barrie Student paper for the PMI Educational Foundation for several years and now serves on the PMI Educational Foundation Board for a three-year period of service beginning in 2018. She is a member of the American Bar Association and the Association of Female Executives in the USA.

Ms. Winston periodically serves as an advisor to organizations such as the National Nuclear Security Administration (USA), U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on topics ranging from Program and Project Management to project reviews, risk management and vulnerability assessments. She served on the Air Force Studies Board for six years and currently serves on the Intelligence Science Technology Engineering Group for the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, as well as actively serving on many studies for the National Research Council.

Since 2008 she has also served in the capacity of Chair of the US Technical Advisory Group and Head of Delegation for Technical Committee 258: Project, Programme, and Portfolio Management, as well as serving on the various Working and Study Groups drafting international guidance standards. She has extensive recent PM experience in the areas of software development and sustainment, cyber security, alternative energy, national defense and security, and has worked closely with local, regional and national officials, including Congress and the Pentagon. She is also a global advisor to the PM World Journal and Library. Becky can be contacted at rebeccawinston@yahoo.com.