

The Six Ps of Project Management ¹

Srinivasan Radhakrishnan

Project management is a complex, multi-layered task, that when done well, can add tremendous value to an organization. This begs the question: what are the considerations that make one project manager (PM) more successful than another? The answers require an examination of the technical skills necessary to be a PM, a discussion about whether project management excellence is an art or a science and the role of people skills.

To put it in context, there are six critical characteristics PMs need to possess to execute projects well and advance in their careers. They include process, people, proficiency, passion, patience and perfection.

Process

In-depth knowledge of project management processes is critical to a PM. Starting from the process groups per Project Management Institute's (PMI®) Project Management Framework from the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK®), through the organization-specific Project Management Life Cycle (PLC) processes to the scorecards and other reporting requirements, the PM needs to be up to date on the processes.

Following a standard set of processes always helps the PM to address challenging and ambiguous projects. Processes help the PM to ask the right questions to the stakeholders to bring clarity to the scope and level set expectations. Understanding the processes will make sure that there are no surprises.

But processes alone cannot make one a successful PM. It is the right application of the processes that will make the PM successful. A PM needs to have the right skills and know when and how to use the available tools and practices. The PM also needs to tailor the processes as necessary for a given project. Knowledge of the processes, leveraging the right process at the right time and customizing those processes for a given project are all equally important to the PM.

People

People management is an integral part of project management. Whether resolving conflicts, assigning the right work to the right people, or keeping the team motivated and energized, people management is necessary. One aspect of people management means acquiring the right resources from the beginning.

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Second, savvy PMs know they need to develop their teams. Motivation and recognition are critical components of people management. One tactic to accomplish this goal is to ask the team to design an award and provide the award to those who perform above and beyond expectations. In addition, PMs should know the work styles, strengths, weaknesses, and motivating factors of each member of the team.

Third, ongoing management is key. Whether small decisions or critical issues, it is the integrated effort of the team that pushes the project forward. The PM needs to be able to propel the team towards the end goal. Understanding what makes people stretch when needed on their own instead of forcing it is important. At the same time, the best management should include a balance between micromanagement and managing to the level of detail that can make both the PM and the team comfortable.

The ability to facilitate collaboration is another important component of the people skills required for effective project management. The team needs to view the PM as a leader as well as part of their team. Difficulties start to arise when the team sees PM as a separate person standing outside and watching them. Successful PMs are always the ones who manage people well.

Proficiency

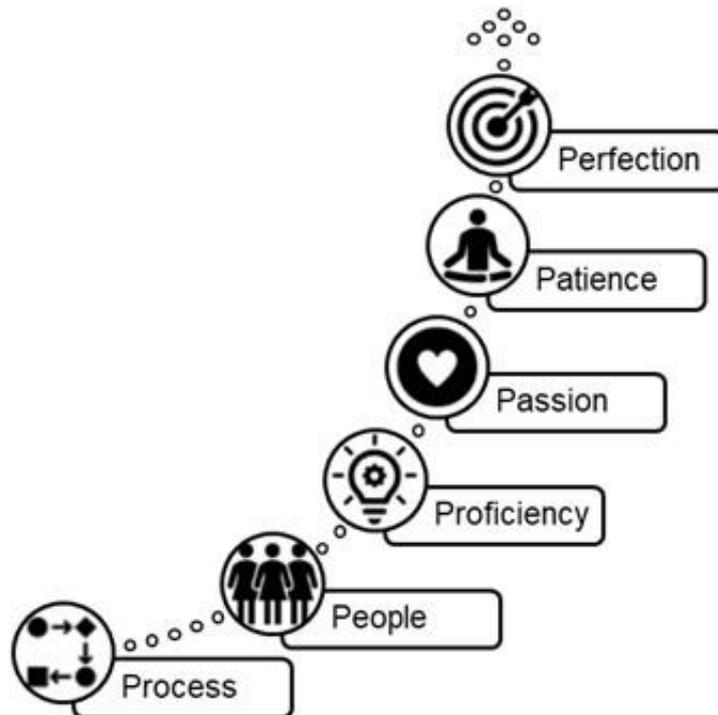
While hands-on experience is not needed in every technology/functionality involved in the project, a PM needs to get familiar with the intricacies of the project as the project progresses. The PM needs to understand the project including the business processes it covers, technology involved as well as other factors. Proficiency is one trait that differentiates a PM from a project coordinator/administrator. A PM who doesn't understand the "subject" loses the respect of the team and will have little control over the project. The team sees the PM as the one who manages the Gantt chart and not the project. If this happens, the team becomes dysfunctional and multiple problems start surfacing.

Another part of PM proficiency involves schedule management. A technically proficient PM will be able to put in a realistic but aggressive timeline that the team can commit to. The PM can also challenge the effort estimates from the team. A PM's ability to manage quality and stakeholder engagement contributes to increased efficiency. Here, knowledge of the business process, technology, and systems are key to helping the team identify and find solutions for critical problems. This ability is uplifting and reinforces the credibility of the PM with the stakeholders.

Passion

Unless there is a passion for project management, all other efforts the PM takes might be in vain. Typically, when people get "promoted" to PM, it is because they were successful in their technical roles like an analyst or developer. But what is important is to make sure they have a sincere desire and commitment to lead as they transition to their new role. As a PM, they will be facing a paradigm shift from "doing the work" to "getting the work done". Unless they adopt this perspective, they are unlikely to be successful. As the saying goes, "If you love what you're doing, it will never seem like work," and that is applicable here.

While having a passion for the job is necessary for any role, it is more important for the PM since PM is the leader. A leader without passion cannot motivate or energize the team. In addition, stakeholders will be able to differentiate a PM who is passionate about managing the project as compared to one who just provides a status report every week. While the mantra, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going,” is true, it’s a PM’s passion that facilitates successful leadership.



Patience

Patience is the most significant asset or characteristic for a PM to exhibit. On one hand, the PM needs to deal with stakeholders who often have a huge magnitude of requirements they expect to be delivered in a day. On the other hand, there are constraints that need to be considered. It is only with patience that this disconnect can be addressed. For example, several team members might be new to the business domain and the technology that accompanies it. Further, not all team members will have the right attitude and passion for work. With patience and a cool attitude, this mindset can be transformed. The fact is that managing and resolving conflicts require patience. PMs need to make sure they don’t reflect the stress towards the team or show any frustrations to them.

In addition to patience with the team, it’s important for PMs to be patient with stakeholders. A PM shouldn’t be surprised when asked, “tell us how can you speed up the process and what help is needed,” even when the timelines established are already aggressive. It takes a lot of patience to convince the stakeholders and draw attention to the real help needed.

At times of crisis, having patience will enable the PM to work on alternates and suggest solutions rather than getting hung up on the problem.

Perfection

“Small things make perfection, but perfection is no small thing,” said Sir Frederick Henry Royce. One can never reach perfection but working to attain perfection is still ago. In psychology, this is called “successive approximations.” The reality is perfection is a moving target. There is always something to improve on.

A PM needs to strive to be perfect to perform risk mitigation and plan for things well in advance. Adherence to processes and guidelines, clear documentation of expectations and roles and responsibilities, proper tracking of status and report outs, establishing timelines are all part of perfect project management. A “perfect” PM will do necessary checks and balances throughout the project.

Aiming for perfection ensures that PMs reach the right balance between agility and quality. In striving for perfection, it is important not to take anything for granted, whether it is a simple task of storing all documents in a shared drive instead of a local drive or handling a complex assignment like a usability assessment. With perfection in mind, the PM will start looking for the best while planning for the worst!

Project management: art or science?

Project management is both an art and a science. Process, proficiency and perfection are the science and people, passion and patience contribute to the art. Project managers who adopt these six Ps will be more successful than those who don't. In due course, high performing teams will evolve and feel proud of what they achieved. The PM will be a source of inspiration for the team. The stakeholders will respect the opinions and suggestions of the PM, and the PM will have a rewarding career.

About the Author



Srinivasan Radhakrishnan

Arizona, USA



Srinivasan Radhakrishnan (Srini) is an Information Technology professional with 25+ years of global IT and academic experience. Srini holds an M.S. in Engineering and multiple professional certifications (PgMP®, PMI-ACP®, PMP®, CSCP®, CSM®, LSSYB, SAP® BW®, AWS-CCP & SAA). Srini worked with Intel for 16 years and is currently a faculty with W. P. Carey School of Business, Arizona State University, USA. For more information please email rsrini02@gmail.com or visit www.sriniradhakrishnan.com