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Interview with Michael Pace
by Yu Yanjuan, PMR
Interview

Project Management Should Be Context-based

Interview with Michael Pace [1,2]

President, IPMA-USA
Executive Assistant Professor
Texas A&M University, USA

Interviewed by Yu Yanjuan
Journalist, Project Management Review: PMR (China)
International Correspondent, PM World Journal

Introduction to the interviewee

Michael Pace, PMP, PfMP, CSM, has been the president of IPMA-USA since July 2021. He is an executive assistant professor at Texas A&M University. He founded and has continued to manage the consultancy Diverging Roads, LLC since 2018. He is a customer-focused management expert and problem solver. He enjoys a reputation for delivering complex and large-scale projects using a best-fit approach (plan-driven, change-driven, Agile, wicked, lean, etc).

His publications include *Managing Projects*, *The Projectless Manager, A Correlational Study on Project Management Methodology and Project Success.*

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[1] This interview was first published in PMR, Project Management Review magazine earlier this year. It is republished here with the permission of PMR. The PM World Journal maintains a cooperative relationship with PMR, periodically republishing works from each other's publications. To see the original interview with Chinese introduction, visit PMR at http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/

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Part I – Story with Project Management

Q1. Congratulations on becoming the president of IPMA-USA! What's your understanding of the role? Have you set objectives for your term in the role?

Michael Pace (Pace): Thanks! This is a great opportunity to continue the success & growth of my predecessors. I consider IPMA unique in that it's competency-based, and the mission of IPMA-USA is to equip project professionals to be better at what they do, be that technical skills or "soft" communication and leadership skills. As the president, I get the honor of helping steer that ship - alongside a board of some of the most qualified folks around.

Q2. I noticed that you majored in Science for your Bachelor's degree. And you turned to management later. What are the attractions of project management in your eyes? Please say a few encouraging words to newcomers in project management.

Pace: My bachelor's & master's degrees are both in forensic science, and I started my career at a toxicology lab startup. Coming from a non-business background, I didn't know what project management was. My bosses just asked me to organize work, plan things out, and deliver results. It turned out that I was pretty good at all that, and it was called "project management". I think accidental project managers are the norm, and I am not the exception. Not too many people go to school to become project managers, which is probably a good thing. It means you don't have to unlearn any bad habits, and you can focus on the skills that you're good at and develop up the skills that are lacking. The biggest encouragement I can give to new project managers is that we've all been there. I think what separates out the good project managers from the bad is a willingness to learn, to try new things, and to adapt. There are lots of ways to do things - figure out what works and what doesn't.

Part II – Project Management Methodology

Q3. Your doctoral dissertation talks about the relations between project management methodology and project success. To be brief, what are the main conclusions of the study?

Pace: The short version is that methods both matter and they don't. There are heavy opinions that Agile is better or traditional is better. Opinions are like armpits, though - everyone has them and they all stink. When you write up your research, it has to be done in a particular format for a particular audience. The most important thing, my research suggests, supported by 20 years of anecdotes, interviews, and drinks with project managers, is that there's no one right way of doing things (but there are plenty of wrong ways).

IPMA-USA had an event this past spring we called "Battle Royale" and we invited a

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debate on Agile vs traditional project management. We constantly hear this argument, so we asked two teams of experts to debate the issue. Lots of great points were raised on both sides, but I hope everyone took away the idea that there are lots of ways to manage a project.

You should take the time to learn as many methods as you can and pick the method that matches the context, the goal, even the organization - something I call "Wicked Project Management". When I say "Wicked Projects", what I mean is that projects can fight back, and they can defy solutions, so what worked once may not work again. So, there's not likely one process or framework that will work, especially not all the time. Instead, we should develop a mindset around how we approach projects.

We should focus on why we're starting up a project, what we're trying to do, how we think we can do it, and who will be involved. These questions all seem basic and elementary, but I would argue that we don't ask them enough.

Part III – About Project Success and Failure

Q4.   Based on your observation, what are the common causes of project failure?

Pace: My biased opinion is a general lack of planning combined with a failure at pivoting. We should spend a little more time thinking before we jump in, though corporations seem more apt to move fast. But then we never get around to the "figure it out" step. We anchor to that first plan or first goal and never adjust. This has tendrils into Agile vs traditional; into portfolio management & killing projects; into involving the right people earlier in the process…

Q5.   You've said, "Failure is an option." When it comes to project management, how should we understand it?

Pace: When I said "failure is an option", what I was trying to emphasize is that success is not guaranteed. You have lots of choices when you manage projects, and these choices may lead to success or failure. The choices you make matter. This is one of the reasons why I named my consulting firm Diverging Roads. It's based on the Robert Frost poem. I try to educate my clients that they have lots of options around them and we should make sure they understand each option and its ramifications, and make the best possible choice. *(As an aside, your readers can reach out via divergingroads.co to connect, especially if they'd like to schedule a consultation).*

More projects fail than succeed. Depending on the study you look at, the failure rate is 70-80%. In some cases, people actually re-defined the term "failed" to "challenged" because project managers don't want to admit they've failed. Regardless of how you look at it, it's harder to succeed than to fail, especially if all you're looking at is scope, schedule, and budget (the traditional iron triangle). Yes, those are important but they are not all-inclusive. I think under-utilized success metrics include customer satisfaction (which can be hard to quantify or measure) and benefits realization. If you're not asking your customers "will this solution help solve the problem you're facing", it doesn't matter

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if you finish the project under budget. If you launch a project to drive revenue generation but don't create a baseline and don't measure the delta created, does it matter that it is on schedule?

I know of an ERP system implementation that was launched a few years ago. Weeks before the system went live, the project team had a press release ready to go announcing the delivery of this huge implementation as promised, on schedule, and under budget. However, the tens of thousands of end-users found the system practically unusable. Departments had to hire new staff to handle the new work created by new processes from the system. So the question is, "Does it really matter that you were under budget and on schedule if you generated more work, cost departments more money, and created more problems than you were trying to solve?"

Q6.   How do you measure the success of a project? In your opinion, what kinds of projects can be called "successful"?

Pace: I think successful projects should have value not only in meeting expectations - budget, scope, schedule, but also in solving the problem at hand. This goes slightly beyond meeting customer expectations, because they often don't know what they want. But most of the time, they do have an idea of the problem they're trying to solve. You have to boil it down to something simple - increased revenue, decreased expenditures, better experience, better efficiency, longer customer tenure. Successful projects don't just follow a process, they don't just come in under schedule, under budget, on scope, and they don't just meet customer expectations - they have to do all that and more.

Q7.   You've reminded us not to focus on just the iron triangle (Time, Cost & Scope) in project delivery. A project that is finished on time, within scope and under budget may prove to be of no business value.   What's your view about value-driven project management?

Pace: A group of my colleagues have discussed project delivery approaches. In that discussion, they listed adaptive project management, traditional project management, predictive project management, Agile, value-based, value-driven, hybrid, dynamic, "new-dynamic", goal-directed … the list seems endless.

In my teaching and my consulting, I emphasize that each project should be managed with the approach that matches up with the context. ISO 21502:2020 says it more formally: "Delivery approach can be any method or process suited to the type of outputs, such as predictive, incremental, iterative, adaptive, or hybrid, including Agile approaches."

So my view on "value-driven project management" is one of concern. I agree with the underlying principle - projects are more than just scope, schedule, and budget and that business value should be emphasized. But I'm not sure that we need a label and method, as both imply that blindly following a process will not lead to success. I really wish we could start looking at "mindsets" about how we approach problems.

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Part IV – Dealing with VUCA

Q8. In the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) era, what do you think is the fittest leadership style?

Pace: My preferred leadership style is "situational leadership". You need to know all leadership styles and then deploy the best one for the people you're working with, at the time when they need it.

According to Daniel Goleman, there are 6 leadership styles - commanding, visionary, affiliate, democratic, pacesetting and coaching. And my take on "situational leadership" is that there are times when you need to use each of these styles. For example, commanding has a negative connotation - you do what I tell you to do. And in most cases, that's seen as bad. But in a daily standup, it's the job of the Scrum Master to keep everyone on track. You tell them to talk about work since yesterday, planned work for today, and any impediments. If the team goes off-topic, you bring them back. If someone tries to derail the meeting, you bring them back. This is a commanding leadership style. At the same time, you might need a coaching style, saying something like "Hey, have you tried this?" for an impediment or a task.

So the main challenge in project management, I argue, is that you need to know them all, know when to use which style, and maybe most importantly, know when NOT to use a particular style.

Q9. In your opinion, what competencies are necessary to help PMs to navigate complexity?

Pace: I think IPMA simplifies this really well with people, process, and organizational competencies. I like listing "people" first - projects are managed by and executed by people, and we have to figure out how to do that effectively and efficiently. Any skills we can develop around communication, conflict management, leadership, cultivating innovation, or handling ambiguity, will help us navigate any project. We support the people competencies with all the process skills - scope, schedule, budget, risk, etc. And we tie everything together with organizational competencies like having a vision, creating a strategy, developing our team, and making good decisions (e.g. governance).

Q10. Faced with disruptive change, adaptability and resilience are essential to PMs. Do you agree?

Pace: Absolutely, I agree. Agile has become a buzzword or conference drinking game, but the definition of being flexible, nimble, adaptable to change is key.

I like to marry up quotes from Dwight Eisenhower and Mike Tyson. Eisenhower said, "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." Tyson said, "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." You absolutely need to go through the steps of planning and to have a plan. Immediately after the planning process, though, you need to figure out what to do when everything

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goes to hell. I think 2020 provides a great example. Every company on the earth had a plan in 2020, then everyone was punched in the mouth by COVID-19. Companies had to go fully remote, cities locked down… Right around March 2020, everyone on the planet had to be adaptable as to how they would keep going. Successful companies did just that.

Part V – Portfolio Management

Q11.   With the rise of project number and complexity, portfolio management is increasingly important. What are your tips on portfolio management?

Pace: It annoys me that portfolio management is treated as an afterthought. It's the highest tier of the project hierarchy and most people understand the concept. But at the same time, I hear from project managers consistently saying that an executive started up the project, and the PM was brought in after everything was established (scope set, budget estimated, arbitrary schedule deadlines published). No one thinks that's a good idea. Executives all the time suffer from "shiny object syndrome". They go to some conference or another, get wowed by a salesperson on a new software, and then a PM gets to install it while also wondering why the company needs it.

Companies need help. They need objective selection criteria for initiating projects; they need prioritization schemes for handling resource conflicts; they need value-driven status tracking so that issues are escalated properly, and they need to kill bad projects. "Sunk Cost Fallacy", continuing to throw money away on a project hoping that performance improves despite evidence that it won't, is a huge problem.

Part VI – Learning from Diverse Cultures

Q12.   You've given lectures in China. Do you believe there is anything that Western project management can learn from Chinese culture?

Pace: Yes, I think there are plenty of things we could learn from Chinese culture. I believe we would all do well to experience and learn from as diverse cultures and beliefs as possible. There's a zen Buddhist concept called Shoshin, which (roughly) means "Beginner's Mindset". I love this idea - an expert can get myopic on the "best" solution, whereas a beginner is open & flexible as to what might work. Occasionally, you'll hear something like, "When all you have is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail." And experiencing new cultures is an awesome way to be open to new ideas, which is one of the reasons why I choose to lead the studying-abroad programs for students. I've been lucky to travel to China, Mozambique, Eswatini, South Africa, and hope to extend that list greatly because each new place has something new to teach us.

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About the Interviewer

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Beijing, China

Yu Yanjuan (English name: Spring), 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* (PMR) Magazine and website. She has interviewed over sixty top experts in the field of project management. Before joining PMR, she once worked as a journalist and editor for other media platforms in China. She has also worked part-time as an English teacher in training centers in Beijing. Beginning in January 2020, Spring also serves as an international correspondent for the *PM World Journal*.

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