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On the Usage of Language
by Kik Piney
Letter to the Editor

On the Usage of Language [1]

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Date: 24 September 2021

Ref: Pirozzi, M. (2021), The Everlasting Importance of a Common Project Management Language, PM World Journal, Vol. X, Issue IX, September. Available online at https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/pmwj109-Sep2021-Pirozzi-The-Everlasting-Importance-of-a-Common-Project-Management-Language.pdf

Dear PMWJ,

I found Massimo Pirozzi's commentary article on project management language[2] very relevant to the recent history of the Project Management Institute (PMI), and especially to the changes of terminology as well as to the fairly recent paradigm shift in the scope of their foundational standards. Massimo's article has provided me with a better understanding of the resultant risks to PMI and to the profession, and these resonate with the concerns I was already writing about in 2018[3]. In the hope of influencing the future direction of PMI, I would therefore like to add my personal views to Massimo's warnings about the potential impact of making such a radical break with the past.

The paragraph in Massimo's commentary addressing the seismic changes in the recent version of PMI's Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK7[4]) present a very clear and dramatic picture of the gap between PMI's earlier model and their current approach. As the author states "process groups have been replaced by the project management principles, and the knowledge areas by project performance domains." The apparent demise of both process groups (which, in all fairness, had led to numerous misunderstandings throughout earlier editions but for which I have proposed a logical repositioning[5]), and of knowledge areas with their component processes (which encapsulated the core of "what is generally considered good practice

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[2] Pirozzi, M. (2021), The Everlasting Importance of a Common Project Management Language, PM World Journal, Vol. X, Issue IX, September. https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/pmwj109-Sep2021-Pirozzi-The-Everlasting-Importance-of-a-Common-Project-Management-Language.pdf

[3] Piney, C. (2018b). Principles and Processes, PM World Journal, Vol. VII, Issue III, March. https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/pmwj68-Mar2018-Piney-principles-AND-processes-commentary.pdf

[4] Project Management Institute (2021), *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*, Seventh Edition, Project Management Institute.

[5] Piney, C. (2018a) "PMI's Models of Project Management Knowledge", PM World Journal Volume VII, Issue 1 January 2018. https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/pmwj66-Jan2018-Piney-life-cycles-process-groups-knowledge-areas-featured-paper.pdf

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in most projects most of the time" [6]) appears to be a deliberate move by senior PMI executives to break entirely with the past – and, possibly, with their historical membership.

This break with the past has left PMI facing a major challenge. Whereas it could be argued that the earlier editions of PMI's standards with their technical focus on processes provided a unique and valuable complement to the principle-driven standards from other organisations, the recent move of PMI into this already well-developed area of standards based on principles left them with very little to differentiate themselves in the marketplace. This need to differentiate themselves may be one of their reasons making conceptual changes and redefining the corresponding language for their principle-focussed editions.

As Massimo explains, "the choices of common languages and communication formats are bold decisions, which correspond to deep bonds in terms of identification, affiliation, and efficient practice". It is to be hoped that PMI factored the danger of breaking these "deep bonds" into their decisions on changing their entire paradigm. This potential break with the historical membership could result in PMI's losing the entire community of existing "keepers" who, a Massimo states, "preserve and update" the language, and form the community of people "who today can share their knowledge and exchange their opinions continuously" by using a freely-shared common language.

I have used the term "freely-shared" to underline the threat to the membership that PMI, now that it is developing its own, proprietary technical language, might attempt to "patent" this specific terminology and thereby restrict its use, subject to prior approval or even the payment of fees. Such restrictions on open access are a real possibility given that similar rules already apply to the use of quotations and images from PMI's existing standards, although these publications were almost entirely the product of hundreds or even thousands of hours of work by the population of willing, unpaid experts who constitute Massimo's community of "keepers".

In brief, I think it would be in everyone's interest for a shared future to be built on foundations from a common past, rather than on its ruins. So, is it too late for PMI to modify their current policy?

Kik Piney

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[6] Project Management Institute (2017), *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*, Sixth Edition, Project Management Institute.