
Important Things in Managing Projects

Interview with Youcef J-T. Zidane, PhD ^{1,2}

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Introduction to the interviewee

Youcef J-T. Zidane is a senior researcher in the Division of Human Development and Social Economics, Centre for Research in Applied Economics for Development (CREAD) in Algiers, Algeria. He has over 15 years' experience working internationally as a Senior Project Manager, developing, planning and delivering projects in many media for large-scale telecommunications infrastructure projects in many countries; then as project manager for research projects in the fields of innovation systems, system thinking, quality engineering and management, good governance, project management, and sustainable development.

Youcef obtained a PEng degree in the field of Electronic and Electrical Engineering from the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineering (INELEC) in Algeria. After a Master of Technology (MTech) in microsystems degree in Germany, he went on to study a Master

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of Science in Engineering (Project and Quality Management) and a PhD in Quality Management and Engineering at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). Youcef's PhD focused on investigating the two dimensions of time (i.e., Chronos and Kairos), and its relationship in managing large-scale engineering projects.

Currently, Youcef is also the lab head of Knowledge-Based Economy at CREAD. Youcef is in charge for research projects among them building ANIS "Algeria's National Innovation System", "Algeria's Knowledge-based Economy", and "Quality engineering and management for research institutions and research projects".

Interview

Part I – About Trust

Q1. Based on your observation, what is the common impact of trust on project performance?

Youcef J-T. Zidane (Zidane): Since it is believed that trust has a positive effect on project performance, it is relevant to try to assess its overall effect. A high level of trust between clients and project design teams reduces transaction costs and maximizes creativity and problem solving. Trust-based relationships will not easily weaken because of differences of opinion. Trust enables partners to overcome difficulties and facilitates mutual understanding. Therefore, trust can help to strengthen and improve the relationships among project partners, and as a result, bring a variety of benefits for the project as a whole.

Project stakeholders and leaders value trust as being vital to project performance and success. Trust in the project teams' ability to complete their tasks increases the level of involvement in the project. The trust at different levels affects the project positively. For example, in innovative or problem-solving projects, a high level of trust between clients and the project group reduces the transaction costs in the early phase of the project. The long-term relationship with clients contributes to establishing level of trust; long-term working with companies and different stakeholders establishes a level of trust and reduces transactional cost in the project. In the early phase of a project, project members from different departments need to know each other first. When project members do not know each other, it takes longer to build trust.

Trust can affect the project through knowledge sharing. Without trust, project members do not share their knowledge and their experiences, which hinders the progress of the project. However, based on the literature, trust can be enhanced through a reward system that influences people's perception of each other's motivation and the value of joint

performance.

Q2. What are your tips on building trust in virtual teams?

Zidane: A big challenge in virtual teams is to create, build and maintain trust among its members. Trust may exist in the initial phase of the virtual team, in the form of swift trust. This type of trust is so fragile and may dissipate, so the team leader should figure out how to nurture that small signal and amplify it until they get the highest level of trust, which is like a spark that gives life to a fire.

At the early stage of the virtual team, because of the pressure, they may show some swift trust among the members. That trust may be developed and nurtured until they have settled trust between them, or it may be shattered, because of many reasons. In virtual teams, even if personal trust relationships are established, in the absence of colocation, the team members might find it difficult to maintain them. Virtual team working often leads to unpredictability of the team members' routine practices, resulting in isolation and anxiety. They may be seen as 'forced' to live with trust in impersonal principles and anonymous experts during their work practices. They don't have the chance to maintain trust relationships through face-to-face interactions and socialization, to sustain reciprocal support and commitment for continuous team working.

Trust relationships, which are based on both abstract systems and other participants, are sustained by their continuing reproduction. There is a need for organizational policies to create conditions for socialization and offer opportunities for active interactions. Such conditions can be achieved, for example, by providing individuals with the necessary resources to become effective contributors in terms of expertise, time and skills, also by providing opportunities to become effective contributors in terms of autonomy and authority.

Trust can only be built through a sequential process that blends together elements of 'encapsulated self-interest', and the development of mechanisms for self-governance and monitoring by the actors themselves. Hence, trust building does involve different aspects, and depends on ongoing direct interaction.

Maintaining trust in virtual team should start by predictable communication. Inequitable, irregular and unpredictable communication within virtual teams can hinder trust. The unpredictable communication even leads to low trust among virtual team members.

Another important issue in the building of trust is transition from procedure-focus to task-focus. Teams, which end with low trust, have exchanged many messages on rules or procedures. The emphasis on procedures, such as how often to check emails, may help to provide an illusion of certainty only. Those teams are unable to move beyond setting

rules. In contrast, all teams ending with high trust have demonstrated an ability to move from a procedural orientation to a task orientation. Once they begin to focus on the task, they will not be disturbed by negative comments or by missing team members.

Q3. What kinds of leadership and organizational culture are necessary to facilitate trust building in virtual teams?

Zidane: One thing that may affect the building of trust in the team is the leadership style. A problem that is common for teams ending with low trust is ineffective and/or negative leadership. The appointed leaders engage in negative rather than positive reinforcement, such as complaining about other members, lack of participation, complaining about too little communication, comparing the team unfavorably with other teams, or sending messages of complaint to the project coordinator. They describe the work as "extremely frustrating" and as a "frustrating experience". These actions are viewed as betrayals by the other team members and contribute little to reinforce commitment among the team. By contrast, the leadership role of the high trust teams emerged after an individual had produced something or exhibited skills, ability, or interest critical for the role of leadership; this can be done by developing key performance indicators, which allow the choice of the correct leader. Moreover, the leadership role should not be static but rather be rotated among members, depending on the task to be accomplished. Those taking leadership roles should maintain a positive tone.

Another thing that may affect the building of trust in the team is the organizational culture, and the value promoted and practiced within the organization, such as phlegmatic reaction to crisis. Virtual teams with high level of trust are marked by an ability to remain phlegmatic during crises.

Benevolence takes time to affect trust. The ability to affect trust seems to change over time and the effect decreases as the relationship is established among the team members.

The most interesting thing about building trust in virtual teams is that the teams with high trust exhibit swift trust in the early stage that is developed into high trust later on.

Part II – About Project Success and Failure

Q4. What are the top 10 universal factors for delays in construction projects?

Zidane: In an article published on *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, Zidane and Andersen (2018), identified universal delay factors, by appraising 104 existing studies published over the past 30 years (from 1990 to 2017), covering 46 countries to reveal that completion delay is an inherent risk in most construction projects,

and that the root causes need to be recognized before effective preventive actions can be devised. They identified the top 10 universal delay factors: (1) design changes during construction/change orders; (2) delays in payment of contractor(s); (3) poor planning and scheduling; (4) poor site management and supervision; (5) incomplete or improper design; (6) inadequate contractor experience/building methods and approaches; (7) contractor's financial difficulties; (8) sponsor/owner/client's financial difficulties; (9) resources shortage (human resources, machinery, equipment); and (10) poor labor productivity and shortage of skills.

Q5. How do you define and measure project success?

Zidane: Success is a perception; project success has been historically defined as a project that meets its objectives under budget and under schedule, known by the iron triangle, i.e. cost, time, scope. This evaluation criterion has remained as the most common measure in many businesses. However, for a modern, innovative and development project, success goes beyond meeting schedule and budget goals, which are the measure of efficiency. Success should include delivering the benefits and meeting expectations of the concerned stakeholders, which is the measure of the project effectiveness. Nevertheless, defining these dimensions of success (effectiveness, impacts and sustainability of the project) is difficult and most can only be evaluated years after the project has been completed.

A project can only be successful if the success criteria are defined from the start. When we initiate a project, it is essential to define success through the success measures. I think the success measures include efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, impact and sustainability.

Efficiency is a measure of the ratio between the input and the output. Efficiency is regarded as a question of doing things properly and producing project outputs in terms of the agreed scope, budget, schedule, and quality. An important point should be clarified: Quality is not a constraint per se, but often a by-product of the other three factors (scope, schedule, and budget), and quality generally suffers when the others are not properly managed.

Effectiveness is a measure of the extent to which management attains its objectives, i.e. doing the right things. The project deliverables are measured in terms of concerned stakeholder satisfaction.

Relevance is an overall assessment of whether a project is in harmony with the needs and priorities of the owners, the intended users and other attested parties. A change in policies or priorities could imply that a project is assigned lower priority, or that it loses some of its rationale. It becomes less relevant. Relevance deals with the needed time to

make the right decision to start the implementation of the project (i.e., GO). If the decision is GO and the project becomes less relevant because of a change of policies or priorities, the assessment of relevance will instead be handled further by effectiveness, impact, and sustainability.

Impacts are all unexpected positive and/or negative changes and effects of the project, both in the short term and the long term. “Impact” as success/failure measure is divided into the following levels: during-the-project impact, the short-term and mid-term impact, and the long-term impact.

Sustainability concerns measuring whether the benefits of an activity are likely to continue after donor funding has been completed and/or withdrawn. Projects need to be environmentally sustainable as well as financially sustainable.

Part III – About Engagement

Q6. You’ve written an article titled “When Stakeholders Shape Successes or Bring Failures”, which emphasizes the importance of stakeholder engagement, right? Would you please offer some suggestions on stakeholder engagement?

Zidane: The early involvement of stakeholders, both internal and external, is of high importance. The big challenge for the project management team is to identify those stakeholders who can affect the project, and then manage their divergent demands through good communication in the early stages of a project. Unfortunately, most of the project management teams are allocated at the execution phase. Therefore, the project initiators should handle the role of identifying and managing stakeholders’ expectations. A combination of the power / interest matrix and holistic evaluation model (e.g. PESTOL) can enhance management of the stakeholders. Furthermore, there is a question of resources versus effort: even though focusing more on external stakeholders will contribute to dealing effectively with the varying interests of the stakeholders, this effort will also require resources. Hence, there is a need to ensure a proper balance between allocation of resources and the degree (or scope) of the effort required to manage each stakeholder group.

The concurrent philosophy is conducive to true lifecycle analysis. It brings together multiple individuals to address all angles of a project from the project inception and enables the accumulation of average shared knowledge and information among all the participants, so as to reduce downstream risks. To reach high level of concurrency within the whole project lifecycle, the client / owner / sponsor have to take the initiative to implement concurrent philosophy in managing their projects, and thus automatically all the following organizations (contractors, suppliers, consultants, subcontractors, etc.) had better adopt it in a systematic manner. The early involvement of all participant firms in the

early project phases will lead to high level of integration and is a proper way to share information and knowledge. Late involvement of stakeholders leads to less accumulated average information and knowledge sharing among the participants. The average accumulated shared required knowledge and information decreases each time new firms are involved (contractors, subcontractors, etc.).

Q7. “Project Manager Perception: It is all about putting yourself in their shoes!” Would you please elaborate on it?

Zidane: When dealing with social complexity in a project, you will need more skills than the traditional aspects of project management require such as technical, intellectual quotient (IQ) and managerial quotient (MQ) competences. Project managers will also need other proficiencies, which are related to values sharing and promoting; the behavior aspects such as soft skills, wisdom and improving their emotional competences (EQ). When I am asked by project managers how to improve their emotional competencies and deal with the social complexity in a short time, I always answer them first by saying, “It is all about putting yourself in their shoes, the shoes of the project stakeholders.”

Part IV – About the Black Swans

Q8. Faced with the unknowns such as the “Black Swans”, in which direction should project management develop?

Zidane: According to Oxford dictionary, crisis management is the process by which a business or an organization deals with a sudden emergency. A “Black Swan” is produced when the gap between what we know and what we think we know becomes dangerously wide. This concept is closely related to uncertainty and learning. A “Black Swan” event is usually a surprise, at least to the observer. However, the “Black Swan” event heavily depends on the observer. What may be a “Black Swan” surprise for a turkey is not a “Black Swan” surprise to its butcher, so the main objective is to “avoid being the turkey” by exploring and identifying areas of vulnerability in order to avoid surprises. In projects, while some may disagree, almost all failures, even catastrophic ones, are not really “Black Swan” events but a series of failures that alone may have a negative impact on project outcomes but lead to catastrophic failure if combined. However, it is surprising how often experienced project teams ignore the early warning signs and move forward into the project lifecycle despite serious problems in many areas that are key to project success. This will ultimately lead to the “Black Swan” event materializing. That is when it is too late to take any preventive actions.

In recent years, in many organizations, the sheer volume of orders and projects needing to be handled concurrently has driven the growing need for project management. Many

companies established PMOs to handle the coordination. This will help organizations to survive during the crisis and the unstable environment around them.

For the governmental organizations, they should have crisis plans, and these plans can be developed by involving project managers and their expertise such as risk management, knowledge management, early warning assigns, etc. Plans of crisis such as epidemic, extreme weather, etc. should be prepared in advance and updated regularly. Those who are proactive and ready for all types of crises by planning for all possible scenarios in advance are sure to cross the danger before those reactive people who deal with crisis by improvising.

Part V – About the Concept of Time in Managing Projects

Q9. Your PhD dissertation is about the relationship between time and project performance. To be brief, what is the conclusion of the paper? For project management practice, what does the research imply?

Zidane: The PhD paper title is “Need for Speed” (Insights into the Concept of Time in Managing Large-Scale Projects: Focus on the Concept of "Time" in its Two Dimensions – i.e., Quantitative Time as Chronos, and Qualitative Time as Kairos). In addition, the PhD dissertation is based on five research questions:

RQ1: What is the current state of affairs and performance vis-à-vis the elapsed time, the time to delivery and other project aspects in a sample(s) of large-scale engineering projects?

RQ2: What are the factors that cause delays in large-scale engineering projects?

RQ3: What are the relationships between project speed and project flexibility, uncertainty and complexity?

RQ4: Is faster project delivery always better? If so, why?

RQ5: How can projects be delivered faster?

It is very hard to summarize all the findings of the PhD in a few lines. However, to be very concise, the PhD thesis is all about time and project management. The need to reduce project duration is driving firms to continuously search for tools, techniques, methods and philosophies to achieve that. There are many scheduling tools, techniques and methods available, which have been practiced for decades. However, many researches and studies show that a significant number of projects exceed their desired delivery time. To some extent, it has been concluded that operational implementation of these tools,

techniques and methods alone, in isolation, is not satisfactory for gaining the desired benefits; it should be well supported by complementary factors such as stakeholders' commitment, improvement of organizational culture and management practices, competent personnel, continuous improvement processes, supportive management, etc.

Time management is the act or process of planning and exercising conscious control over the amount of time spent on specific activities, especially with a view to increase effectiveness and efficiency. Time is one of the most critical constraint in projects. It is also one of the vital success criteria for every kind of project. Time management in projects involves processes required to accomplish timely completion of projects. Business economic value creating the potential to speed up projects manifests itself as a reduction in time-related costs and can lead to increased income due to reduced waste and less rework. One of the key aims of this Ph.D. dissertation is to develop a better understanding of the concept of time (chronos) and timing (kairos) in managing projects.

Q10. What is the difference between time and timing? How will time and timing influence project performance respectively?

Zidane: When we take the two concepts separately, time is more about the efficiency of the project, the time interval needed for accomplishing the project. Then comes the timing, which is related to the effectiveness of the outcome of the project; e.g. a new product technology developed by a company later than competitors will not be sold, or will be sold in low price. Time and timing are related, which is like the Yin and Yang, day and night. Time and timing will reflect the project performance measured in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.



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About the Interviewer



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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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