

Managing People in Projects – an Effective Strategy ¹

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Abstract

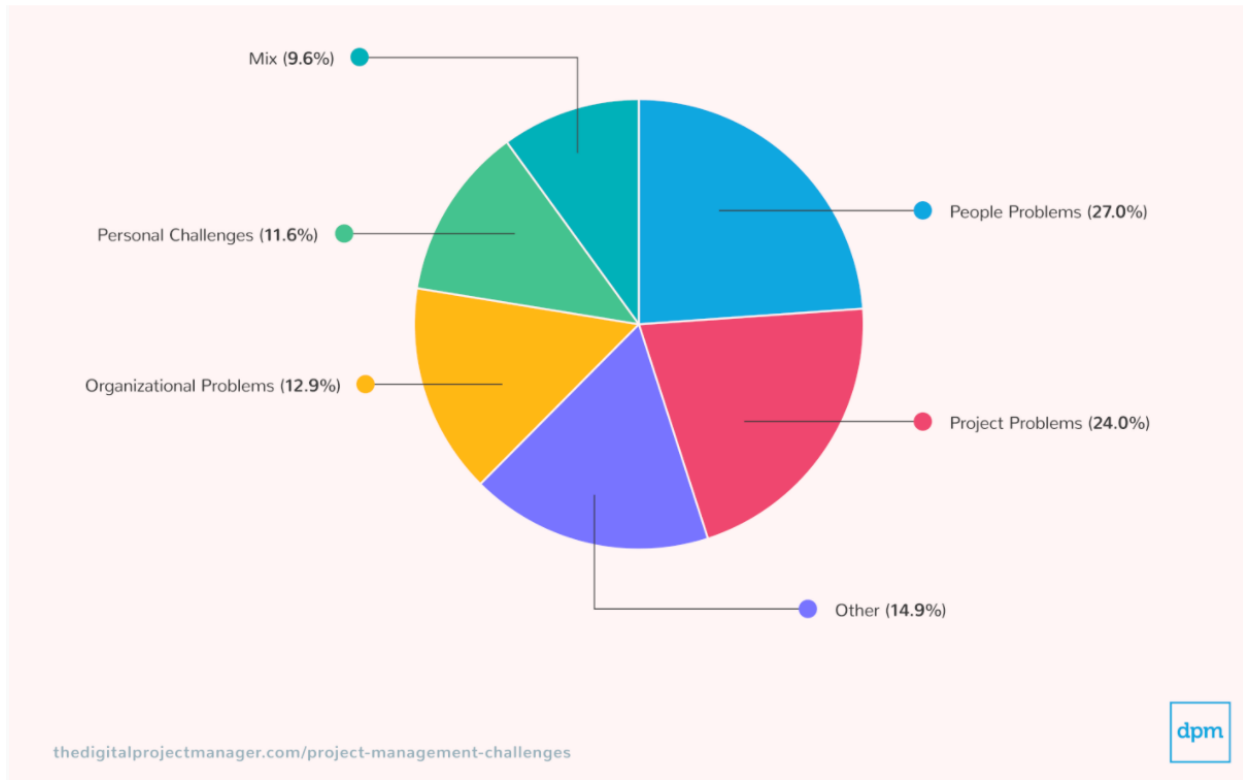
Project Management is much more than delivering within the three constraints viz. time, scope, and cost with the right quality. People-related challenges are at times more complex than process or technology or business challenges. It is essential for a PM (Project Manager) to understand the people matrix and the team dynamics to execute the project successfully and deliver results.

This article provides an effective approach for PMs to manage people based on the three vectors - Skill/Talent, Opportunity & Passion/Interest. PM could follow a different approach for each team member depending on where they stand with respect to these three vectors. Characteristics of four possible scenarios and the action plan a PM could take for each of the scenarios are presented in this article. By applying appropriate management techniques this way, the PM can get the team energized and set it for success.

Introduction

A survey on top project management challenges for 2020 shows people problems contribute to 27%.

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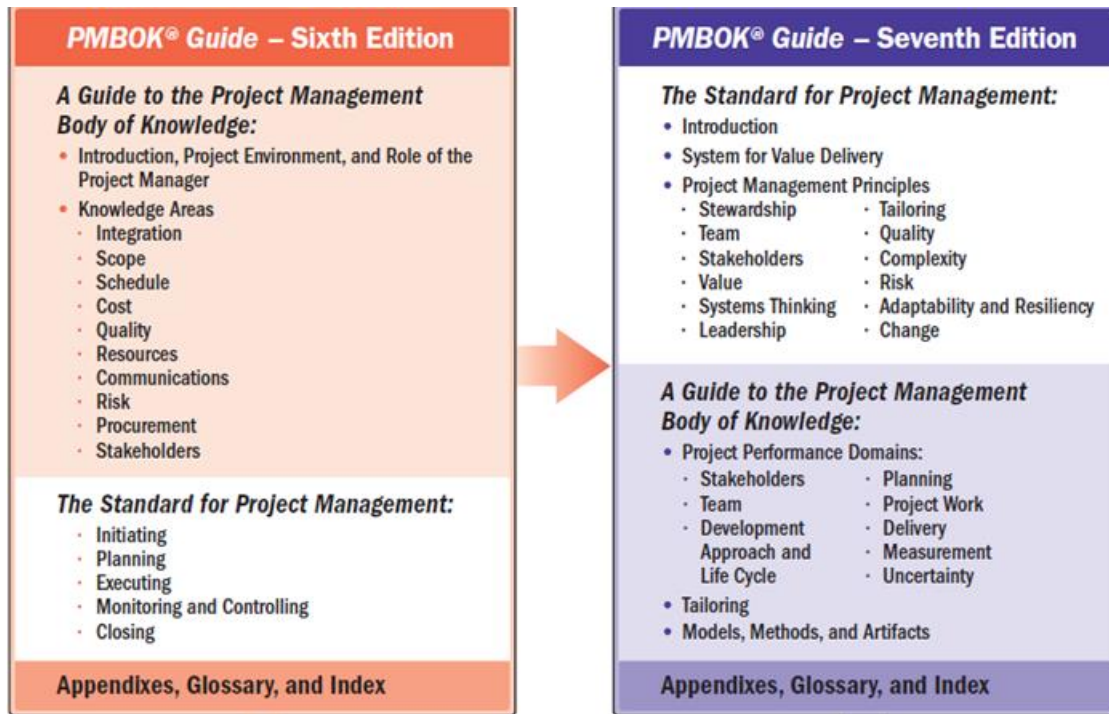
Source: Top 3 project management challenges in 2020 [survey data]. The Digital Project Manager. (2021, July 31). <https://thedigitalprojectmanager.com/project-management-challenges/>

Some of the other areas shown in the chart like the Organizational Problems & Personal Challenges could also be related to People. It's not uncommon for any survey to identify "People Challenges" as one of the topmost challenges of project management.

Even with the same set of processes, some projects can exceed expectations and some fail. It is because, at the end of the day, those processes are executed by people. As General Colin Powell said "*Organization doesn't really accomplish anything. Plans don't accomplish anything, either. Theories of management don't much matter. Endeavors succeed or fail because of the people involved*".

People skill is referred as one of the important characteristics for a successful PM ^[1].

Project Management has people management embedded in it. The people management aspect is cited as part of the "Project Human Resource Management" Knowledge Area in the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK®) 6th Edition. The recently released 7th edition of the PMBOK® maps these aspects under Project Management Principles ("Stewardship", "Team" & "Leadership") and Project Performance Domains ("Team").



Source: PMBOK® Guide (2021)

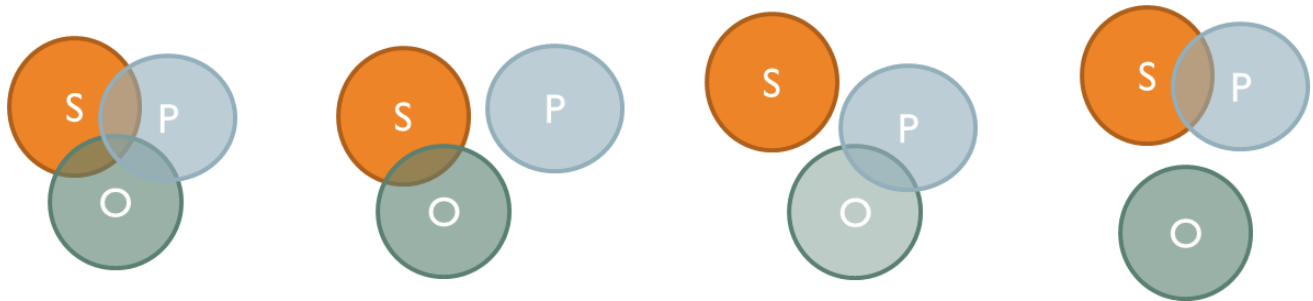
The above challenges increase multi fold in matrix organizations where the team members report to a functional manager where the accountability lies.

Strategy / Solution Approach

An effective strategy to handle team members would be to better understand their skills & interests and map it to the opportunity they have on hand. Every team member in the project has certain skills(S) and interests/passion(P) which may or may not match with the current opportunity or project (O) that they are working on.



There are four possible scenarios with this suggested model based on Skills(S), Opportunity(O) and Passion(P) of the team members.



Depending on where the team members fit into these four scenarios, the PM can apply different styles of management.

SOP Scenario I

Characteristic: All 3 dimensions – Skill, Opportunity & Passion meet. It is the “Career Best” for the individual and an ideal situation for the PM.



Key Takeaway: They are the STAR performers in the team. They are the “go-to” people for the PM. They provide the momentum for the whole team. The PM will be able to commit to certain ad-hoc scope changes because of these people.

Watch areas: Some caution is needed in case of long running programs where people might lose their interests/passion.

Action Plans: Appropriate & timely recognitions are needed to keep them motivated. PMs usually take care of recognizing under-performers when they do well but they “take it for granted” when it comes to STAR performers.

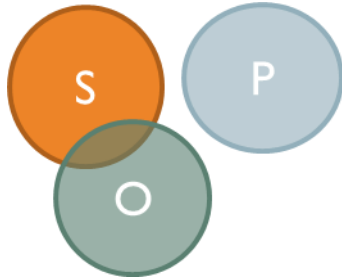
Opportunity:

PM should look at providing additional/different roles & responsibilities at different phases of the project. Typically, when TIGER teams or focus workgroups are formed to address a significant challenge in the project, these people can be asked to lead.

“Recognition is most effective when it is directed to specific individuals rather than to teams or groups of employees”

SOP Scenario II

Characteristic: Skill & Opportunity meet but Passion is different.



Key Takeaway: Level set is needed with the functional manager & the team member for the success of the project

Watch Area: There is a high probability of losing the team member in the midst of the project.

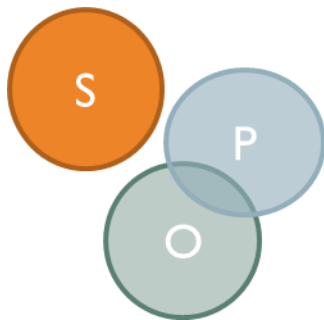
Action Plans: 2:1 with the functional manager & the team member is required for getting an agreement from the team member. This project could be an interim opportunity for the team member or a step towards long term commitment. In order to manage the risk of losing the team member, PM needs to look into having another person as back up.

Opportunity: There is a hidden opportunity here. Certain challenges in the project due to scope changes, vacation/training or sabbaticals & bandwidth constraints will result in some critical piece of work needs to be done. Such tasks might be of interest/passion to these team members and could be handled by them. In projects having multiple technologies, the PM can identify if the team member's interest suits any particular technology.

“Don't miss the doughnut by looking through the hole – Anon”

SOP Scenario III

Characteristic: Passion & Opportunity meet but Skill is absent or lacking.



Key Takeaway: Training & mentoring is needed for the team member

Watch area: This is a simple scenario but could potentially become complex when the team member doesn't understand/accept the skill set gap. PM should ensure that these members are not put on Critical path in the initial stages.

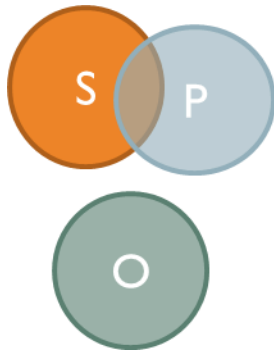
Action Plans: Proper training/ramp up plan with timelines & success criteria needs to be established. Close Performance management is needed as well. In situations where a mentor is assigned from within the project, the mentor needs to be rewarded appropriately.

Opportunity: Addressing the passion of another team member who is interested in coaching & mentoring. Swap Roles & Responsibilities within the team where possible. Besides, the PM could provide some direction and coach the team member.

“Good leadership consists of showing average people how to do the work of superior people – John D. Rockefeller”

SOP Scenario IV

Characteristic: The team member has the right skills and passionate about doing the same thing, but the Opportunity is different, probably because the organization is chartered to do something else! This scenario could happen with fresh graduates coming out of college and joining the organization.



Key Take Away: This is the most difficult but unavoidable scenario. This stage requires very good support from the functional manager in ensuring that the team member is directed towards the project and gets necessary training.

Action Plans: PM needs to keep up the motivation level / morale by good team interactions & team building activities. The PM should reinforce a “Win & Have Fun” attitude. PM could look into providing POC (proof of concept) opportunities based on the passion or consider innovative ideas coming from this team member that could become another project.

“Motivation is the art of getting people to do what you want them to do because they want to do it – Dwight D. Eisenhower”

Conclusion

The PM should strive to create a positive energy that helps project team members overcome obstacles and rise to new challenges. Conversations are needed at the beginning of every phase, whenever a new team member joins or after organizational changes (restructuring or manager changes). These conversations could be formal or informal. This is a collaborative effort by the functional manager & the PM.

This methodology comes handy to the PM when the timelines are very aggressive. In those situations, the PM may not be able to spend equal amount of time with all the team members. This model will help understand how much to focus and what action plans are needed for each team member. You can get the Scenario I going first, trigger passion for Scenario II, put a training plan for Scenario III and the fourth one would come along.

By applying the appropriate strategy, the PM can get the team energized and set it for success. Last but not the least, it is important for the PM to have the right skill sets and the passion to be a PM and should be working on the right opportunity. In other words, the PM should in SOP Scenario I - career best!

References

- [1] Radhakrishnan, S. (2021). The Six Ps of Project Management, *PM World Journal*, Vol. X, Issue V, May. Available online at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/pmwj105-May2021-Radhakrishnan-the-six-ps-of-project-management2.pdf>
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About the Author



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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