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Interview with Dr Ken Smith
by PMWJ Editors
Interview

Ground Truthing and other Lessons Learned

over a 60 Year Career [1]

Interview with Dr. Ken Smith [2]

Author, Consultant, PM Pioneer, USAF (ret)
Consultant for ADB, the World Bank, UNDP and USAID (ret)
Manila, The Philippines

Introduction to the interviewee

Initially a US Civil Service Management Intern, then a management analyst & systems specialist with the US Defense Department, Ken subsequently had a career as a senior foreign service officer -- management & evaluation specialist, project manager, and in-house facilitator/trainer -- with the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Ken assisted host country governments in many countries to plan, monitor and evaluate projects in various technical sectors; working 'hands-on' with their officers as well as other USAID personnel, contractors and NGOs. Intermittently, he was also a team leader &/or team member to conduct project, program & and country-level portfolio analyses and evaluations.

Concurrently, Ken had an active dual career as Air Force ready-reservist in Asia (Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines) as well as the Washington D.C. area; was Chairman of a Congressional Services Academy Advisory Board (SAAB); and had additional duties as an Air Force Academy Liaison Officer. He retired as a 'bird' colonel.

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[2] *Editor's note: This virtual interview was initiated in early 2022 by a former correspondent who could not complete it for unspecified reasons. It is being published here with permission of Dr. Smith.*

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After retirement from USAID, Ken was a project management consultant for ADB, the World Bank, UNDP and USAID.

He earned his DPA (Doctor of Public Administration) from the George Mason University (GMU) in Virginia, his MS from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT Systems Analysis Fellow, Center for Advanced Engineering Study), and BA & MA degrees in Government & International Relations from the University of Connecticut (UCONN). A long-time member of the Project Management Institute (PMI) and IPMA-USA, Ken is a Certified Project Management Professional (PMP®) and a member of the PMI®-Honolulu and Philippines Chapters.

Ken's book -- **Project Management PRAXIS** (available from Amazon) -- includes many innovative project management tools & techniques; and describes a "**Toolkit**" of related templates available for free directly from him at kenfsmith@aol.com on proof of purchase of PRAXIS.

Ken has been a frequent contributor to the PMWJ in recent years. To view other works by Ken Smith, visit his author showcase in the PM World Library at https://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/dr-kenneth-smith/

Interview

Q1. You have worked in the project management profession for more than five decades. How do you describe this profession? What are the joys and challenges respectively? What changes have you witnessed in this profession?

Ken Smith (Smith): **1.** Project management (PM) is a vital universal occupation, and its practitioners are active in every conceivable sector of endeavor. Structuring and coordinating personnel, resources and activities within an organization to foster ever more efficient and effective performance in **stable situations** is a difficult, but necessary, on-going managerial function. Managing **deliberate interventions to effect change** in the *status quo* of an organization's internal &/or external environment to attain pre-defined objectives – *which is essentially what project managers do* -- is even more crucial and challenging.

Project Management has its own '*body of knowledge*,' tools & techniques and skill requirements, as well as a code of ethics to guide its practitioners; and individuals can even be 'certified' as professionals -- based on their level of knowledge &/or competence -- by various organizations, such as the international Project Management Institute. However, while it behooves incumbents to behave '*professionally*' when dealing with stakeholders, contrary to popular opinion, IMO – *never humble* -- **project management has not yet risen to the level of a 'profession'** such as law, medicine, engineering, or accounting. The fact is project management practitioners are essentially self-regulated -- unlicensed and unfettered by international, national or local government standards and

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regulating authorities. [*Maybe that is for the better?*] Whether or not project management should be considered a '*stand-alone*' profession, or simply a generic skill-set and occupational '*add-on*' practice for anyone to apply, I leave for others to continue the debate.

In any event, the reality is that there are many '**amateur** *project managers*' at large, who – *lacking awareness of, or competence with, extant systematic PM tools and skills* – expose their organizations to unnecessary risks by their '*muddling through"* approach.

2.   Throughout my career, I was involved with many projects from diverse sectors in various supporting, as well as managerial, roles. The principal joy I personally derived from participating in project management was its non-routine working environment, with considerable – *albeit not absolute* – autonomy, and flexibility to be innovative. Also being instrumental making unprecedented things happen while working towards attaining the project's objectives; and once in a while seeing them actually materialize.

The challenge was having to deal with the innumerable obstacles involved – *people, processes and problems* (the unforeseen as well as the predictable); the frustration in trying to make things happen, and all too often falling short – mostly due to circumstances beyond my control!

Also – *because of governmental policies and practices of the organizations with which I was employed* — periodically I was transferred from one area to another. [IMO, a fundamentally-flawed policy & practice for project managers, although it was a great learning opportunity for my future consultancy career.] Consequently, I left behind projects on which I was actively engaged, while 'inheriting' projects of others at various stages of planning and implementation. Thus, being present at project completion was a rarity.

My project management perspective was therefore mostly of the journey – rather than the destination; although occasionally – with the benefit of uninvolved hindsight (that Americans refer to as "*Monday-morning quarter-backing*") -- I was also called upon to evaluate on-going & completed projects, and recommend 'next steps.'

3.   The changes I have observed and encountered are essentially two-fold: – one positive; the other, unfortunately, very detrimental.

On the one hand -- beyond infrastructure project engineers (most of whom were already schooled in many PM tools) -- there is **much more awareness today** of the need for project managers who are knowledgeable about the tools, techniques and skills required of a good manager for managing change processes; as well as the considerable level of effort devoted to training future – and extant amateur – project managers.

On the other hand, the practice of project management has become much more complex and challenging. When I started out as a management intern in the 1960's, my experience was that the Project Manager was only responsible for one project, full-time; and was all-powerful. He directed the project's activities and was accountable for its

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resources – people, funds, and equipment – which were all under his control.

That is rarely – *if ever* – the situation today. Trying to do '*more with less,*' and undertake multiple projects with limited resources, many organizations today have succumbed to prioritizing organizational process efficiency over project results effectiveness by resorting to 'matrix management.' Furthermore, some organizations even saddle their project managers with responsibility for more than one unrelated project. At the same time, instead of a coherent 'Project Team,' team members are dispersed throughout functional departments beyond the PM's authority, from where they are 'farmed out' to ply their individual technical skills – intermittently -- on multiple projects!

Consequently, the amount of attention project managers can devote to each of their projects is diluted; control over implementing scheduled activities which are their responsibility is reduced; and authority over utilization of available resources is relinquished to the functional managers who possess them. The net effect is to engender competition and conflict between project managers within the organization who are all vying simultaneously for the same resources. Concurrently, the collateral benefits formerly derived from team building – the sense of belonging that induces groups to strive for greatness – is largely lost.

While still held responsible and accountable by '*higher up*' executives, the so-called project manager no longer calls the shots and manages its resources, but is relegated to 'coordinating' and 'following-up' with functional managers on the disposition of those resources; and collecting & processing data to provide progress reports to executives and other stakeholders. A far cry from semi-autonomous project management!

There is apparently no prospect for turning back to the "good old days" in most organizations. Under these prevailing contemporary circumstances, PMO's and/or PMU's are currently the best practice '*work-around'* measures to deal with the 'new norm' and mitigate the situation somewhat.

Q2. From your perspective, what are the trends in PMO evolution?

Smith: In order to cope with the aforementioned dysfunctions created by 'matrix management' with respect to project management, PMO's are evolving -- from originally being staff support for an individual project manager -- and are now emerging as either:

1) **A staff for direct monitoring & control of all projects** by the 'manager of project managers' – i.e. a program or portfolio manager who has authority over all project managers,
2) **A neutral service center support** for functional organizational departments which retain management of their own projects, or
3) An **in-house management, monitoring, auditing & evaluation** entity for the **organization's executive.**

A note of caution: While each of these roles is doable, they are unique, and if combined in one entity -- rather than helping managers, will only create more problems for everyone

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involved. [*My article: Smith, K. F. (2018). A Practitioner's Guide to the PMO; PM World Journal, Vol. VII, Issue XI – November elucidates the options with the pros and cons of each approach*.]

Q3.   In the VUCA era, projects are getting unprecedentedly difficult. What changes do you believe should we make to traditional project management approaches?

Smith: Although the pace of technological innovation and change is rapid in today's Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous environment, human nature is still essentially the same as it ever was. Indeed, the basic responsibility of the project manager hasn't changed. It was – and still is – to deal with people to make things happen rather than the technical aspects of the project.

Perhaps counter-intuitive from the corporate perspective, rather than trying to DIY (Do it yourself) in-house at the lowest cost, IMO the best option is to Outsource priority projects; i.e. have others DIFY (Do it for you). In this mode, the contractor's chief of party is held responsible to the organization's project manager for quality delivery on budget in a timely manner.

The other DIFY option is to Outsource the team members -- either individually, or collectively, as required -- to support the organization's project manager. Short of reverting to a 'projectized' management structure, the 'strong matrix' form is the next best option,

These DIFY approaches are commonly practiced by governments and the international development donor banks who collectively manage thousands of projects, world-wide. In either case, the organization's project manager has full-time control over the implementation team, rather than competing with others to corral team members, part-time, from the in-house talent pool. Nevertheless, DIFY does not assure success, as procurement and management of contractors and sub-contractors present their own sets of problems.

For non-traditional *'learning process'* type projects where the objective is clear but the way is murky, until we know better, intuitive management judgement – i.e. making it up as you go -- and the 'trial and error' method (now redesignated the Agile approach) is the only recourse best practice for *systematically* 'muddling through.

But for traditional '*blueprint-type*' projects – now referred to as 'Waterfall' -- with known processes and 'roadmaps,' the tried-and-true methods still apply. PLAN YOUR WORK – realistically I might add – THEN WORK YOUR PLAN! No need to panic!

Q4.   As we all know, the failure rate of projects remains high. In your opinion, what are the prime causes of project failure?

Smith: The following three would top my list:

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1. Demands by executives, clients (and politicians) for unrealistic delivery schedules.

2. Prioritizing organizational efficiency over project delivery effectiveness.

3. Poor planning, inadequate risk assessment, and *unrealistic scheduling, & budgeting* – given the organization and project working environment.

In the 15th Century, Niccolo Machiavelli opined that "*Nothing is more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage, than the creation of a new system*" reasoning that "*the initiator has the enmity of all who would profit by the preservation of the old institutions, and merely lukewarm defenders in those who would gain by the new ones.*"

Despite our modern management tools, techniques and organizational structures, the constancy of human nature continues to thwart project managers' aspirations!

Another major shortcoming is the issue David Pells [*PMWJ Editor*] has focused on – namely that we ensure we DO THE RIGHT PROJECT!

I was 're-enlightened' on this aspect by Paul Giammalvo in a recent discussion, about the lack of '360 degree' risk analysis, and widespread failure to factor in the '**Disbenefits**' of collateral damage to the project's external (i.e. impacted) stakeholders during the Benefit:Cost analysis process. There is no better example of this than the contemporary world-wide governmental implementation of mandatory community lockdowns and employee layoffs for life-saving public health objectives without giving due consideration to the *disbenefits* on individual employment, the national economic, transportation & logistical services, and children's education.

So, now – *with Monday Morning Quarterbacking* -- the debate continues to rage: was the prevention policy & practice worse than the just letting the virus run its course; as prior epidemics have done, and concentrating on treatment?

Q5. What are your tips on how to monitor projects more effectively?

Smith: The best way I found is "**Ground Truthing!**" In other words, visit the project site(s) frequently. Sometimes spend several days there, meeting not only with project officials but also observing and making informal contacts with various target beneficiary 'stakeholders' for their perspectives.

Also, have **milestones assigned for every activity start and completion,** as well as intermediate milestones for activities which are still on-going during each reporting period. That way, you get unequivocal feedback on **all activities in-process** instead of no feedback, 'ceiling' estimates, or even worse -- merely vague*' 'working-on-it' responses*. However, during the recent pandemic, I could only empathize with those managers whose travel and contacts are constrained or completely banned.

Q6. Value means different things to different people, so in practice how do you measure the success of a project? Do you have some experience to share about value

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management?

Smith: Results, results, results! Define what the objective is, and after the fact, follow up to determine the extent to which it was achieved.

In that regard it is important to distinguish between different levels of objectives and responsibilities, and recognize that often the objective of a project is beyond the project manager's level of responsibility or capacity. For example, a project manager may be accountable for delivering a facility on time and on budget, but it is beyond his/her level – and after the project is completed and accepted -- whether the facility is actually used as originally intended. In conducting training on project management tools & techniques, I have the participants provide me with a pre-course and post-course feedback assessment as to their knowledge and competence on the topics covered. The improvements are then "my results" for which I can take credit and value added. However, after the course, the value added is two stage:

      1) whether the participants actually apply those tools, and

      2) whether there was a significant difference because of their use.

Those I have no control over and require separate assessments.

The LogFrame Tool & technique is the best practice I know for clarifying objectives and establishing the basis for measuring success.

Q7. You've written an article titled "EVALUATION: The Project Management Cycle's Sixth Dimension". What is it mainly about?

Smith: **Evaluation is the process of project implementation follow-up** – i.e, is the project on the right track towards attaining its objectives, or -- *if completed* -- did the project actually achieve what was planned; not only in terms of on-schedule delivery and within budget, but also in the aforementioned results of the situation it was expected to address.

This is important at the higher executive level, and to the public at large for government projects.

Project managers usually have no responsibility for, or involvement in determining the objective beyond implementation, although – at least within the international development community -- the Logical Framework is an effective tool for explicating it. Consequently, evaluation is not usually included in the project manager's skill set. However, it is important that project managers be aware of the project's higher-level objectives, identify appropriate indicators & collect data for monitoring and subsequent evaluation; as responsible or not, they will be held accountable for the outcome by the court of public opinion! My article alerts project managers to this dilemma, and I have courses that address this aspect for planning as well as evaluation tools and techniques.

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Q8. You've worked as a project management consultant across the globe. What are your secrets of communication, especially virtual communication?

Smith: **No secrets!** Everyone has their own approach to inter-personal communication, and some are better at it than others. Some are 'people-oriented' and come by it naturally. Others – *such as myself* – are more 'work-focused' and only learn through experience, study or observation and try to emulate what seems to work best in any given situation. I simply try my best to let everyone involved know that I am open and honest about my concerns, findings, conclusions and recommendations to achieve my – and the project's -- objectives.

However, despite occasionally '*blowing my top*' under pressure, I strive to be respectful of personal & cultural sensitivities; and rather than being brutally honest -- which is sometimes necessary in oral communication – I have learned to be more circumspect in preparing final written reports!

While virtual communication is inescapable these days – and often useful -- I prefer face-to-face communication.

Q9. You've made a keynote presentation on "Empathetic Leadership". Would you please explain what is "Empathetic Leadership", why it is important and how to apply it in practice?

Smith: Simply: put yourself in the other person's shoes and try to see the situation from their perspective.

I myself evolved from the 'bottom-up' in both civilian and military careers. I often directed people, and managed -- as well as supported -- projects for which I had no technical sector professional competence but had to rely on the technical expertise of others., so have no illusions about '*knowing it all*' or being '*better*' than anyone else.

Project team members also have additional useful knowledge and opinions from their experiences in other aspects which they can contribute to the general good -- if and when given the opportunity.

Despite innumerable depictions in the popular entertainment environment of '*hard-headed*' authoritarian-type leaders and managers, I have been exposed to all types as a follower, middle-manager/leader &/or adviser over the years; as well as practiced some styles myself. But ultimately, I learned that empathetic leadership simply worked best for me in any role; and particularly in the civilian workplace environment.

Q10. Would you please share your viewpoints on the importance of personality typing in team building?

Smith: People are unique! They have different abilities, preferences, likes & dislikes, and working styles. Nevertheless, we all share certain traits in an infinite variety of combinations. Myers-Briggs is a classic personality test that identifies 16 basic 'types,'

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and several other tests exist that approach personality typing from different perspectives.

In project team efforts, it is important that individuals work together in that environment in a manner with which they are most comfortable and can produce their best efforts. '*Square pegs in round holes*' simply generate too much friction! While we can't always assure harmony, project managers should strive to alleviate discord created by inherent personality traits.

To that end, many years ago, I also developed a '*quick & easy*' "personality & working style" spin-off from Myers-Briggs that classifies individuals into 4 basic categories, which I used effectively throughout my career, and now teach to others.

Q11. With the Millennial Generation entering the workforce, what challenges will HR departments face? How should we manage and lead employees of the Millennial Generation?

Smith: As a member of the Traditionalist "*B.C.*" Generation – *i.e. before computers* -- I no longer manage projects, so **I am unable to provide empirically-based advice on how to lead and/or manage the Millennial generation -- as distinct from others.** [*Parenthetically, I should also note here that 'leadership' and 'management' skills are differentiated rather than synonymous; but I digress – that is another topic worthy of a separate discussion!*]

However, I continue to teach Millennials (and others) essential traditional project management tools and techniques which I have acquired and/or developed during my career, as enumerated in my book **Project Management PRAXIS** (*available from Amazon*); and have found them both receptive to and appreciative of what I have presented. Nevertheless -- as mentioned earlier -- true value lies in the "Results" beyond the classroom; dependent upon the extent to which participants apply, adopt &/or adapt these tools and techniques to attain their project objectives.

Apart from generational differences, COVID has also wrought significant changes in the work environment with which we are ALL struggling to cope. In my situation now for instance, instead of conducting workshops face-to-face, observing, reading & reacting to participants' body language – *even though I did it poorly* – and kibbitzing where I observed the need to provide a helping word or hand, I am reduced to 'zooming' – often at faceless name tags, and asking for feedback, which is usually scanty.

Q12. In the modern world, what are the top qualities of a project manager?

Smith: The same as always – the key quality is being able to communicate and deal effectively with other people -- those you supervise, those with whom you coordinate, and ultimately your organizational superiors and other external stakeholders to whom you report!

A lesson that is taking far too long for organizational executives and HR specialists to

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learn is that in the modern world, the pre-eminent requisites of effective project managers are knowledge about pm-related tools & techniques, coupled with a personality for dealing effectively with people.

As long as competent technical specialists are assigned to the project, the project manager does not need to be a leading technical specialist of the sector; and indeed, apart from any pecuniary & prestigious benefits, managerial functions are a diversion from his/her professional expertise, with a different set of non-technical challenges to cope with.

While technical specialists are not precluded from project management positions, the managerial role requires them to relegate the project's technical aspects to others, and assume instead the concomitant functions, duties and responsibilities of project-related administrative, financial & logistical support; information processing & reporting, as well as maintaining external relations with stakeholders – all of which require a different set of skills. So be careful what you wish for as you may get it!

Q13. Do you think AI will replace project managers?

Smith: **No.** Managers have to make a lot of decisions for which there are no algorithms, and situations that cannot be automated. However, automation will undoubtedly change the work environment by processing data more efficiently and effectively, replacing much of the routine work formerly done by people.

Hopefully, AI support functions will also mitigate some of the constraints currently imposed on project managers by dysfunctional matrix management organizational structures.

Thank you!

Ken Smith is celebrating his 90th birthday this month!

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To read more about Ken's background and experiences, see the following:

Smith, K. F. (2022). **Traveling the Critical Path: Observations & A-musings of an Itinerant Project Management Practitioner**, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue VII, July. Available online at https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/pmwj119-Jul2022-Smith-Traveling-the-Critical-Path-story.pdf

Smith, K. (2021). **USAID, PM Best Practices, an Interview and a Life Story**; Commentary, *PM World Journal*, Vol. X, Issue VIII, August. Available online at https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/pmwj108-Aug2021-Smith-usaid-pm-best-practices-interview-life-story.pdf