

## China Brings Cultural Strengths into PM

### Interview with Stacy Goff <sup>1</sup>

Co-Founder & Past President, IPMA-USA  
Former Vice President & Honorary Fellow, IPMA



**Interviewed by Yu Yanjuan**  
*Journalist, Project Management Review: PMR (China)*

#### PMR Introduction

Stacy A. Goff, IPMA Level D®, the PM Performance Coach, is the owner of a USA-based, global Portfolio, Program, and Project Management consulting, coaching and training company. A Project Management practitioner since 1970 and consultant since 1982, he helps improve Enterprise, Department, Project Team, and personal PM effectiveness and Performance.

An insightful consultant and dynamic speaker, Goff presents at major global congresses and conferences, and offers workshops of interest to Executives, Managers, Program and Project Managers and leaders, technical staff, and individual contributors. His Project Management tools and methods are used by government agencies, enterprises and other consultancies on six continents.

A prolific writer, his articles appear on StacyGoff.com, IPMA-USA.org, and *PM World Journal*, and are translated on other websites around the world. His Change Agents blog is a

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popular section of the StacyGoff.com website. His industry vision is sought by others: He wrote Chapter 9, Visions for the PM Software Industry, for Project Management Institute's book, Project Management Circa 2025. He co-authored the chapter on Project Communication for IPMA-Germany's advanced Project Competence Baseline.

Goff has co-founded professional associations and chapters, and participated in standards development teams. He is co-founder and recent President of IPMA-USA, and was the 2011-2014 Vice President of Marketing and Events for IPMA, the International Project Management Association. In 2015, he was named an IPMA Honorary Fellow. He has also served as a member, chapter co-founder, and contributor (articles, book chapters, webinars) for PMI, Project Management Institute, since 1983.

Mr. Goff brings a results-oriented approach to Personal, Project, Program, and Portfolio Management; thus his tagline, the PM Performance Coach. His insight for the needed PM Competences and his grasp of the secrets to organizational performance translate to improved business results.

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## Interview

**Project Management Review (PMR):** You were an amateur race car driver. Have you applied PM knowledge in driving race cars?

**Stacy Goff (Goff):** The experience of driving race cars and having a PM background is a two-way street—it offers benefits in both directions. First, I was successful as an amateur race driver because, in part, of my project management experience. I was always better-prepared than most other drivers; I was able to strategize, prioritize, and more intensely focus than others; it was easier to convince sponsors to support our effort; and we always attracted a strong team.

Second, as you suggest, racing improved my project insights: the excitement, risk and intensity of “driving at speed” gave me a much deeper understanding of the secrets of high-performance. And this was not just my own high-performance efforts, but also, those of my team.

**PMR:** In one of your articles, you have made comparisons about different PM certifications. What's your attitude towards certifications (their role, necessity, etc.)?

**Goff:** Yes, the article you mentioned, *Comparing PM Certifications: Which Is Best For You?*, evaluates the top certifications in the world of project and program management. These range from exam-based certifications, to those that require professional assessment of demonstrated competences in actual initiatives. In the article, I identified three criteria for evaluating PM certifications: A. Prerequisites; B. Breadth of Coverage; and C. Rigor of Assessment.

To write the article, I used independent research that evaluated a wide range of PM

certification offerings, scoring each certification against the criteria above. I cross-multiplied the three criterion's normalized scores to form what I named "The Certification Effectiveness Cube". The key to each certification's appropriateness (and thus necessity) is whether it matches the role, and level of experience, of the certificant, and of the certification.

Each PM certification has a target audience, and a purpose for that audience. Some, such as those that use multiple-choice exams, are often designed for an entry-level audience: Those who are just beginning their career in project management. They do very little for more advanced practitioners.

Other certifications, with stronger prerequisites, higher breadth of coverage, and greater rigor, are targeted towards advanced audiences. These require more than memorizing for an exam; they require demonstrated competence or results in actual projects or programs.

There are many other certifications beyond those I evaluated. Are they necessary? Perhaps! Three audiences for whom a PM certification might be most-needed include:

- A. Those who are new to the practice of project management can benefit in two ways: first, in assessing themselves against a body of knowledge or competence, and finding where they need to study or learn more; second, in going through the preparation and testing process and being able to show their certification level.
- B. Those who meet the prerequisites, and have been working in the role, but are not recognized by their employer as a certified practitioner.
- C. Those who serve in advanced roles, who know their current employer well, but either a) cannot advance in their enterprise without additional recognition, or b) intend to compete internally or in another organization for a more advanced position.

Here's a caution: There is a significant difference between training to take a certification exam, and training or learning for project performance improvement. The former tends to focus on short-term memory retention (which expires, if unused, within two weeks), and how to take an exam. The latter tends to focus on how to manage a complex initiative to measurably increase business results through projects. Today, there appears to be more money spent around the world on the former, rather than on the latter. And then we wonder why so many projects fail!

**PMR: We can draw project management wisdom from China's culture. As a frequent visitor to China, do you agree with it?**

**Goff:** I totally agree. When I visit China, I combine speaking at major events, discussing in-depth project experiences with participants, together with touring. For an example of touring, one may read about the Terra-Cotta Warriors in Xi'an. But experiencing the magnificence of the site, and considering the massive project, first to build it, then to hide it, and now to reclaim it, gives new perspective and respect for the project engineers and artists of 2200 years ago.

In 2006, I travelled to Shanghai to speak at a Global Project Management conference. My first China event was deep immersion into Chinese project culture. And I wanted more. Just four months later, I was back for more. This was also in Shanghai, but with a follow-on trip to Beijing. I presented a paper about our PM Competency Model at the 2006 IPMA World Congress. I also performed a coaching session for IPMA's Young Crew.

I also served as a judge for the Chinese Construction Project Manager of the Year award. It was here that I reinforced my view about the exceptional insights and project management wisdom from these young (early 30s in age) experts in charge of USD billions of projects around the world.

In 2014, I spoke at an IPMA Research Conference in Tianjin. Immediately following my keynote speech, Professor Qi Anbang spoke on "Chinese Traditional Management Philosophy and Their Modern Project Management Style". He spoke of *The Book of Changes*, and its influences on change management and risk management. Professor Ding Ronggui weighed in on "Chinese Wisdom in Project Governance", citing Chinese dialectical logic, *The Book of Changes*, and many other useful insights. And Professor Ou Lixiong spoke of the Chinese project management body of knowledge, PROJECTICS. This is a far more sophisticated approach than others around the world.

I came away from this event with several impressions: First, China brings cultural strengths into project and program management that other cultures cannot easily adopt. Second, China is clearly in the process of refining its strengths, rather than merely adopting more of the practices of Western cultures.

**PMR: As project managers, they have finite resources, so "Doing More with Less" mantra is heard with increasing frequency. In your opinion, how can PMs do more with less?**

**Goff:** Doing more with less on a sustaining basis has been a recent theme in project management, so here's how we can do it:

- Prioritize better, then staff fewer current projects appropriately, completing each one better, faster and at lower cost, rather than fragmenting talent across too many projects.
- Place team members full-time on large projects, at least half-time on medium ones.
- Eliminate project and ready response priority conflicts; reduce interruptions in project work.
- Position Managers to "carry the water" for the team, pushing barriers out of the way, and demonstrating that the organization works for the team, rather than vice-versa.
- Measure and manage both effort and results, and then, recognize and reward achievements.

**PMR: According to your experience and observation, what are the core qualities of a competent project manager?**

**Goff:** Working as a project manager in the early 1970s, I found very little information available about project management. Most project managers took a purely technical approach to project management. But those who were most-effective also focused on leadership, teambuilding, interpersonal skills, communication, stakeholder engagement, and other “soft-side” skills. I found, early in my career, that these are essential qualities for project managers. While the technical processes are an important foundation, they are worthless without the ability to lead and engage the entire team.

As I progressed in my career, I became involved with strategic planning, organizational politics and power, and how to work effectively with staff functions, such as legal, procurement, finance, and others. As a result, I learned to focus on the business context, and the linkage of projects to strategies, and to business success through projects.

When I began my consulting firm in 1982, I applied that broader approach to project management. I also formed alliances with the few consultants who understood the need for my broader range of ‘core competences’.

In the late 1990s, IPMA integrated technical project management with a clear understanding of the organizational context, and with leadership and behavioral skills. This was all branded with IPMA’s unique Eye Of Competence, with a certification system that used competence-based assessment (not just tests of knowledge-retention) of project managers. Starting in 2013, PMI also issued the Talent Triangle.

Therefore, the core qualities and competences of project managers and other key participants are: technical, leadership and behavioral, and contextual/strategic.

**PMR: You add “Product Talent” to PMI’s Talent Triangle. What are the reasons for that?**

**Goff:** Naming the Talent Triangle is a smart move. But it is not enough for project success. That’s why I also advocate Product Talent.

Product Talent is one of four unique success-dimensions. The Product Talent area list includes objectives, problems & opportunities, testing, validation & verification, know-how, solution delivery, evaluating business results, etc. This talent comes from key roles in each project, including Project Sponsors, Resource Managers, top Executives, and the right working team members. Each role requires clear assignments, and delivered responsibilities for their projects to succeed.

Each of those roles has more impact on project success than the level of competence of the project manager. In fact, even the best project manager will fail if there are any flaws in the performances of those key roles. This fact, ignored by many, is evident in hindsight to all. In any

project, it is Sponsors, Resource Managers, and Executives who prioritize and assign the right team members for each project.

The “Know-how” at the Product Talent list is an essential factor in project success. Drawing from my sports car racing experience, mentioned in Question 1, you can have the best driver, the best suspension, tires, and brakes, but what if the engine performs dismally? In projects, the know-how of key team members is the essential engine that powers project success.

**PMR: You’ve mentioned the secret weapon of high-performing project teams is small projects. What is the logic behind it?**

**Goff:** I made a survey among my clients. The results were very interesting:

- Small projects were the least efficient and least effective way to deliver project results.
- Very large projects, with multiple years of duration and more than 24 people on multiple project teams, were next-least efficient way to deliver results.
- Large projects, six months to a year in duration, and one to three teams, were significantly more efficient and faced lower risk.
- Medium projects, three to six months in duration, and having three to seven half-time team members, were the most efficient way to deliver project results.

Then what factors make small projects the greatest opportunity for improvement?

- Insufficient problem or opportunity definition;
- A sense of urgency often limits time for planning;
- Changing priorities, as each new urgent emergency emerges;
- Difficulty in assigning the top talent to projects perceived as less-important;
- A wide range of skills are needed, but the small project team may have only one-to-three team members—who must fill all skill roles;
- The ‘project manager’ is most-often also the primary worker on the team, resulting in conflicting responsibilities;
- Each team member has many other responsibilities, including ‘their real job’.

Seeing an opportunity, we developed a methodology for managing small projects. It includes project planning and execution guidance, key roles and responsibilities, templates for capturing and conveying information, and essential actions for success. In the first offerings of the two-day training for the Small Project Guide, we were surprised to see that half the class were Aerospace and Defense Engineers of very large programs.

When I asked why they were participating in a Small Project Management class, the reply was always something like this: I’ve got great control of my program. It is the multiple small projects, over which I have no control and that I totally rely upon, that are always the failure points for me.” They figured that the class would help them establish that control.

Most project managers and team members gain their first project experiences working on small

projects. Thus, small projects can be the foundation for project talent in most organizations. Lessons learned properly in small projects can scale gradually to medium, then to much larger, more complex projects and programs. As your enterprise project talent increases, their value-add becomes exponentially more powerful in supporting your strategy implementation.

To see the original PMR interview with Chinese introduction, [click here](#).

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## About the Interviewer



**Yu Yanjuan**

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**Yu Yanjuan**, 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 Magazine and website. In the past, she has worked as a journalist and editor for China Manned Space Agency website and *Student English Times*. She once worked part-time as English teacher in training centers. For work contact, she can be reached via email [yuyanjuan2005@163.com](mailto:yuyanjuan2005@163.com) or LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/yanyuan-yu-76b280151/>.